# THE COLOMBIAN

Irene Frain

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# PHOOLAN

14 February 1981... one by one she lined up the Thakurs of Behmai, screaming for the blood of the 'twins', Tool Box and Boss, two bandits. Disgraced by them for 23 days; worse still, forced to cross the square naked, and losing Vikram, her lover, to their bullets, this was the day of her revenge. Violence, rape and cold-blooded murder run like leitmotifs through this part real, part fictional novel, based on the life of Phoolan Devi, who terrorized parts of northern India from 1981 to 1983. And yet there is more than darkness, as her complex faces are revealed; the woman, revengeful, but playful, sensuous, seeking gentleness sometimes; the rebel, disdainful of tradition from girlhood. The French original of this novel, *Devi*, has sold over a million copies.

IRENE FRAIN, winner of 'Chevaliar des Arts et Lettres', is a journalist, besides a well known fictionalist. She studied literature and classics at the Sorbonne University. Her fascination for India, resulted in her award winning novel, *Le Nabab* (1982), and has culminated with *Devi* (1993), a runaway success in France. Other significant works are *Desirs* (Desires, 1986), *Secret de famille* (Family Secrets, 1989) and *Quai des Indes* (Gateway of India, 1993), an account of her experiences in India while researching for *Devi*.

PHOOLAN

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‘So there you are. Do you really think you can start playing around with me again?’ she shouted.

She caught him by the hair before he could answer and dragged him towards the well, as if to beat him.

‘You will be sorry that you ever disobeyed me.’

She picked up her Mauser, took a step back and fired straight at the right knee. Her aim was faultless. The man doubled over in the dust.

She smiled. No one here had ever seen her smile. Sohan thought she looked almost beautiful, despite her trousers and shirt.’

# PREFACE

The tale which follows is largely fictitious and presents just one version among many, of a true, lifestory. It tells about Phoolan Devi, a young female bandit, who for two whole years terrorized India, taking revenge for the numerous rapes she was subjected to, and for the death of her lover. On 12 February 1983, the day her escapedes finally came to an end, a French magazine approached me to write about her. I was somewhat familiar with the region where all this had happened. On the other hand, I knew very little about the life and character of the young passionaria. In order to piece together the story of her life, I referred to several articles from the Indian press. What was striking was the number of contradictions that appeared. In a broad sense, everything was true in this incredible story, but the details changed all the time. Because of the ambiguities I turned down subsequent requests to develop this tentative biography, into a screenplay, a documentary or a novel. Until this effort.

The editor, Maren Sell, among others, tried to convince me to write about *Devi*. I agreed. On one condition: that I could carry out research and be able finally to discover the truth.

I made several trips, to India, gathering more witnesses each time, collecting articles and statements, police reports, films and even dry, sociological studies. However, each time I had to face the same truth as before. If by some chance the witnesses didn't contradict each other, neither did their versions ever actually match. And the policemen who interrogated Devi were sometimes the main culprits in furnishing completely different versions of this startling odyssey.

I came to the conclusion that in fact only my heroine could clear up these various contradictions, and so I decided, rather naively I must admit, to meet her. Imprisoned in Gwalior, only members of her family and her lawyer were allowed as visitors. I

was lucky to be able to talk to her about her dangerous and sometimes comical escapades. Maren Sell shared these disconcerting events with me.

Devi was (and still is) seriously threatened. This is how she summed up her situation: 'If I leave, my enemies will kill me. If I stay in prison, I will gradually die.' But I must stress, that although Devi's version didn't always tally with the many interpretations that had already been given of her adventures, neither did her version reflect the story she had given to the police, or indeed to the journalists when she still had permission to meet them. In other words, this narration was constantly being reinvented, even by its heroine.

In short, I understood that I could never fathom Devi, unless I, in turn, gave my version of her adventure, my own perception of the reality; like in Kurosawa's Rashomon. Therefore, this story is simply one of many, a tale with the unique desire to lose itself in the sea of the imagination, where the Indians used to stage the meeting between life and literature, in 'the ocean, *Kathasaritsagara,* into which rivers of legends flow'

Without Andre Lewin's and Catherine Clement's continual support and tender care, it would have been impossible for me to carry out my research in India. This book is dedicated to them, as well as to my husband whose encouragement was invaluable during my various journeys throughout India and during the long task of writing this novel. In Paris, Marie Fourcade, research assistant at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, tirelessly answered my many, varied questions. As time went on, our intellectual rapport eventually became a lasting friendship. Devi is also for her. I would also like to thank Khushwant Singh, who warmly received me and agreed to answer all my questions concerning the myth of Phoolan Devi, despite his other preoccupations.

Finally, my sincere thanks to all those, in both India and France, who offered me their support.

IRENE FRAIN

# PART I

While there may be ambiguities about factual details in this story, everyone's agreed on two points; that it happened around midday and that the girl came by the river road. Practically the whole village was there, waiting eagerly, even the two primary school teachers who worked in the nearby market town, six kilometres away where the police station was. Like everyone else, they didn't want to miss the wedding procession across the square, and so they had asked for a day off.

Spring was slowly beginning to break, the only time in the year when the light was stripped of its dusty hue and the hours had a weightless quality about them. Behind the village rooftops and way beyond the fields of corn and mustard flowers, the ragged slopes of the ravines took on an eerie quality, transient, as if about to plunge into the river itself, where since time began, the dreams of the living and the dust of the dead lay side by side.

Like so many others before us, we could exaggerate the tranquility of this fourteenth day of February and say that the peasants of Behmai in their small fields fortified by the gorges, had never witnessed such abundance of corn and milk. Even the river flowing below the cliffs had never been so clear. But the truth is, the people of Behmai though lighthearted, knew in their heart of hearts that on this festive day, of traditional gaiety they were fooling themselves. What really brought them together, more than any thing else, was a recent event: of forbidden pleasure, a wild orgy for twenty three days—of horror for some—which had marked the end of the last monsoon.

They were all in cahoots excepting perhaps the children; and even that is not certain as they were apparently the first ones to tell all. Whatever the case may be, the police affirmed that on 14 February 1981 around midday (the sun was approaching its

zenith), two Behmai peasants while tending their cattle on the hilltop, saw a large group of khaki clad men climbing up the ravines by the river road. They also saw some small boats moored at the foot of the cliffs near the sands, not far from the Devi temple. Immediately, the two peasants hid behind one of the many hill tops. It was, however, impossible to guess how many men there were; they appeared indistinct, a blur progressing slowly, engulfed in a cloud of dust. After a few seconds, the two peasants found the courage to peek out. They discovered, only fifty metres away, a solitary man scouting about, keeping guard. He was unaware of their presence. His signal prompted the rest of the group at the bottom of the gorge, to join him, at a run. The peasants reckoned there were about fifty men in all. As the police party came to a rock-cut Devi shrine they joined their hands in prayer. The peasants realised that they had been mistaken. These were not policemen. In the Valley, only one kind of people would bow so respectfully before Kali: the bandits who lived in the gorges. Two brothers from the village, twins, had chosen this kind of life. But despite the events at the end of the monsoon the peasants did not feel that today was the day of reckoning. The prayer came to an end and the group prepared to march straight on towards the village. To their amazement, it was a woman who led the file. She was dressed in the same police uniform as her companions, with two stars on the epaulette and a small plastic badge on the front left pocket. A cap with a wide brim completed the ensemble. From a loose belt around her slim hips dangled a cartridge pouch. On her shoulder she carried an automatic rifle in military fashion. In her right hand she clasped a loudspeaker, and finally like bandits she wore zipped boots, worth at least a dowry.

The girl marched on determined, proudly. She mingled easily with the rest of the troops, her hair like them, cut short and sharply around the ears. The two peasants did not recognise her straightaway. But as she passed in front of their hiding place, she lifted her head, presumably towards the higher slopes. She didn't see them. But they saw her distinctly; it was her alright, with those deep, dark eyes and the look that told she had lived

ten thousand lives in one and had still not had enough.

The two men no longer dared to speak to one another, nor to move an inch. Only when the first shots were heard did the younger of the two whisper:

'It's her. She has come back.'

All the villagers tell more or less the same story. The uniformed girl arrived like a thunderbolt onto the village square, or rather what served as one; a vast empty space on a slope, unintentionally left between the walls. The well was situated here. The girl raced towards it, jumped onto the parapet and fired several shots. Then she straightened herself and held up a loudspeaker.

The women were the first to realise what was happening. They removed their braziers, their pots and pans, and hid their children in the folds of their saris. The men, on the other hand, were caught unawares. One, who was felling a tree, stopped mid-air. Another, the hairdresser, dropped his razor and locked himself into his house, pushing out his client. Three workmen, repairing a thatched roof, had no choice but to shrink into the wooden beams of the building. Within a few seconds, only an invalid stretched out on his string bed was left to face the woman with the loudspeaker.

He was called Sohan. He saw and heard everything. Nothing escaped his notice. Five years ago he broke his back in a fall from the roof. Now, he usually lay in the shade of a tamarind tree and just watched, analysed and came to his own conclusions. For this he was gifted, often imagining precisely what would later come to pass. To get more information he would innocently question others, or go piggy back to where he could find it. But he never shared a scrap of his thoughts with anyone. That day, when he saw his brother locking himself hastily into the house, forgetting even to put Sohan in the shade, he knew that something strange was about to happen. He was probably the only one who could have predicted the outcome of that day, from the moment he recognised the girl standing on the parapet of the well, her gun at the ready. The girl had pointed her Mauser 303 at him—some policemen even said it was a sten

machine-gun, although it amounted to the same thing. Now, she lifted the loudspeaker and shouted to her gang:

'Round up all the men!'

She had a strong voice—something the villagers and Sohan had not realised. Behind the locked doors, no one moved. The bandits climbed all over the houses, sprang onto the roofs and began rummaging in the thatch. Others, held the invalid at gunpoint and insulted him before demanding his keys.

'I am a simple invalid' Sohan had said. 'I don't have any keys.'

One of the bandits leant over his bed and repeated the question. This time Sohan did not answer. The man hit him several times. It left Sohan breathless, but somehow he managed to repeat that he had no keys. The bandit broke down the door behind the bed.

The rest is a blur in Sohan's memory. When he eventually came to, several of the brigands surrounded him. One of them, a young, fragile boy, eager to seek the approval of his leader, turned him over in his bed and pinned a large sheet of paper to his back. Another man, just beside him, much older and stronger sneered:

'Mind that piece of paper. Our names are on it. Don't forget. We'll be back.'

The invalid lifted his eyes towards the well. The girl still stood there. She shouted orders for her men to separate into three groups. This was carried out at once, as if rehearsed a thousand times. Sohan found it incredible that these brutish, muscular men should obey this girl, thin as a reed, as if they were performing. animals. She continued to yell orders. The first group was to plunder the houses and grab any arms, jewellery and cooking utensils they could find. The second group was to patrol the northern road and the third, to hunt out all the men in hiding and assemble them on the square in front of her, facing the well.

'Bring me these dogs' she screamed over and over again. Goaded by kicks and rifle barrels, the doors opened one by one.

The villagers did not resist; they were resigned to their fate and registered no surprise when they were pushed in the direction of the well. They didn't dare look directly at the girl.

They already knew their fate. Only three or four, already kneeling dared to murmur a prayer. Once more she screeched through the loudspeaker:

'Stand up! If anyone resists or disobeys me he will be shot down like a dog; like the dogs you are.'

Her voice reverberated off the cliffs of the nearby ravines; it echoed in a deeper tone, thereby hinting at the tragedy about to occur on the village square. It was midday, the time when the naked beauty of the most ordinary gestures is enhanced. But today the midday sun weighed down on the courtyards and the roofs, its light wreaking havoc. From the houses the children's cries could be heard, punctuated by the sound of ripping boxes; smothered groans in the background were supplanted by the sound of material being ripped apart. Over all these sounds came the laughter of the men, insults and the rustling of intertwining bodies.

Back in the square, the men of Behmai, encircled by guns, all thought about the telephone which was three kilometres away, along the northern road. But they knew, that route was guarded; the girl had just ordered her men to do so. And anyhow, no one knew how to use the telephone, not even the teachers who pretended that it never worked, though it could after all be true. The people of Behmai also considered the police station, yet a further three kilometres away on the same road—but who could reach it? Suddenly, they remembered the wedding procession. The women in their best saris, weighed down with jewellery, who were going to appear at the end of the road followed by the unarmed men and the children. The people of Behmai were convinced that the girl and her men would ambush the cortege, loot the women and rape some of them, then kidnap the men. They were bandits. So was the girl.

Nothing stirred in the square, apart from a cow. Finally, the girl pronounced the dreaded words that the Behmai people would rather not have heard:

'Where are the twins?'

Silence. She repeated the question. Her fingers clutched the loudspeaker.

'Bring me those dogs', she insisted.

The peasants remained mute.

'Sons of the devil, do you really believe you will get away with this?' she now screamed.

A bandit, very like a large cat, very tall and thin with the same gait as the girl, approached her. He seemed calm, almost gentle. The invalid from his bed saw a glimmer of hope in the eyes of the villagers. Whispering the man consulted the girl. Then he smoothed down his moustache, and declared:

'This is the day of our revenge!'

His voice carried right across the square. The girl tried to imitate him but her voice became hoarse as she shouted for the third time.

'I want the twins.'

'We do not know where they are', moaned several villagers.

She picked up her loudspeaker once again and howled:

'The Thakurs on one side; the rest on the other.'

Sohan had been expecting these words. He had always known that the girl was not a Thakur. He believed, she would never dare to seek revenge because she was first of all a woman and above all a Mallah. No matter how far back you went, the Mallahs never attacked the Thakurs. The Thakurs had always held power, commanded and dominated, whereas the Mallahs were the ones born to submit. What was happening at the moment was proof of this. Instead of remaining calm as the Thakurs did, the Mallahs broke down. Baburam, the barber was already on his knees begging for mercy between sobs.

'Shut up, you old idiot' the girl barked. 'Stop whining.'

For the next thirty minutes she passed from Thakur to Thakur, striking them with the barrel of her gun, kicking them, reciting the same phrase, while simultaneously spitting out insults:

'Where are the twins? Who is putting them up? Who is feeding them?'

The villagers, entreating, had stuttered out the same answer as before, 'I don't know Madame, you must believe me.'

The people of Behmai had elevated her to Madame out of

pure fear, addressing her as they would a real lady from the town. Each time she heard 'Madame', her face darkened and became intense; her eyes became sharper, she tightened the pouch around her hips, to reassure herself that she was still armed and she continued to hit.

Four more prisoners were recovered by the bandits. These were not Thakurs, Sohan immediately thought to himself. Indifferent to this, the woman commanded them to join the group of Thakurs she was interrogating, and persisted in the same vein:

'Where are the twins?'

She finally reached the young Krishna, fragile and just a young father. He replied as the others had done. The girl heard this and exploded. Perhaps, because Krishna was the same age as her or because he was more sickly than the others. She struck him in the chest so hard that he rolled in the dust, becoming almost unconscious.

'You are all liars, real lying bastards,' she boomed through the loudspeaker.

Quite suddenly, she appeared to be at the end of her tether. She lowered her loudspeaker, and wiped away the perspiration that dripped off her temples. A certain momentary weakness must have crept into her gaze, because one of those taken prisoner took the opportunity to mutter:

'She is the one who is lying. Besides, she is only a whore.'

The girl bristled on hearing this and lowered her eyes perhaps because of the sun. In any case, when she raised them her rage appeared to have been contained. She now stood before a prisoner:

'So there you are. Do you really think you can start playing around with me again?' she shouted.

She caught him by the hair before he could answer and dragged him towards the well, as if to beat him. Then she took a step backwards and looking at him added,

'You will be sorry that you ever disobeyed me.'

She picked up her Mauser, took another step back and fired straight at the right knee. Her aim was faultless. The man

doubled over in the dust. Screaming in pain, he begged her to stop, and chanted her name.

She smiled. No one here had ever seen her smile. Sohan thought she looked almost beautiful; despite her trousers and shirt. Notwithstanding her victory, she was still alert. Like a wild animal, she examined her prey. It was hard to make out whether she was happy to see him suffer or whether she needed to reassure herself that she had not made a mistake.

According to Sohan, the second hypothesis was closer to the truth, because twice she called the injured boy by his name, Surendra. In a continuous stream, she hurled the worst kind of insults at him, the kind rarely heard from a woman's mouth.

But quickly, she became tired of this game. She repeated the name of her victim, 'Surendra, Surendra...' At this moment, she was like a young mother protecting her child, ready to rock him to sleep and to give him her breast; what is more, she had started to sing. It was a song from a musical comedy, a catchy, well-known song, the kind that one can hear all day long on the radio. The melody was beautiful,, but the words were savage:

'Shall I kill you or shall I let you live?' Some of the prisoners recognised them, apparently having seen the film. But the daydream was short-lived. The woman suddenly stopped singing. She aimed at the. second knee this time, again with the same cold precision. The man cried out in pain again, and flailed in his blood. Her singing, resumed.

Some say that the girl was so cheerful that she jumped onto to the roof to deride her victim even further; that she danced, her Mauser swaying at her hips. This particular detail is omitted from police reports. Such a half-truth was, no doubt, invented by the townspeople when the dark legend of Behmai began to spread. But the reality of the events surpassed all imagination. In agony, his arms beating wildly the man shouted words that were, in turn, echoed by the cliffs. Not a single person understood them, except perhaps the girl. Finally, he vomited. At this point, a villager tried to reason with the girl. He pleaded as the others had: 'Please, please Madame, put an end to his suffering.' She shrugged her shoulders as if to say. 'And what

about me, do you not think I have suffered enough; that you have stopped making me suffer?' Quite suddenly her smile froze. She shot him once in the head, or in the neck, or face, depending on which version you believe. All agree that it was at close range and that Surendra died there and then.

One of the prisoners fainted, others broke down and one of them even vomited. The girl seemed exasperated. Her face fell. She turned towards her men and shouted through the loudspeaker:

'Gather up the booty. Take the prisoners. We are going back.'

Sohan had had time to count them; 'There were twenty-six of them; old and young; Thakurs, and four Mallahs that she had added to the group as a safeguard, going down the path that led to the river.

Soon after they left, the women in tattered saris eventually plucked up courage to look outside. And there they saw the hunched body of Surendra lying in the square. They were beyond tears and wailing; they could only sigh deeply, a fatalistic sigh of those who have lost everything. They threw themselves down by Sohan's bed where they were joined by others who had veiled their faces. The women huddled together, still trembling, and watched the descent of the troop of villagers flanked by bandits towards the river, instead of the expected wedding procession.

Apparently, just after the shots had been fired, one of the women entered her house, her hands over her ears, then came out a little later and sat next to Sohan. She held a young baby close to her breast and murmured: 'Sometimes they have no bullets in their guns. They shoot only to scare the people.' Sohan was about to point out Surendra's dead body lying beside the well, but he didn't dare, cutting short the movement of his hand and placing it instead on hers. It was just at that moment the bandits returned.

The girl was still at the head of the file. There was no visible emotion on her face. She walked past Surendra's body without as much as a glance, and then veered towards the other end of the square. The vulture which had been circling the corpse had

finally chosen to follow the river. From every point on the horizon, other birds of prey came to join him.

'Are you going to kill me too?' Sohan asked defiantly when he saw the girl stopping near his bed.'

The girl's appearance had changed; the pools of her eyes were no longer so dark. A shadow had fallen over them making them dull. She looked at him scornfully and proceeded to poke him in the ribs with the butt of her Mauser; but it was more a friendly shove than a brutal one, a move that could have been interpreted as: 'We are on the same side, you and me, so be serious.' Then she muttered in a low voice to Sohan's surprise, 'It is not noble to kill an invalid.'

Just a few husky words, scarcely expressed. She then turned on her heel and left quickly with her gang, towards the river. 'Noble' was the last word the invalid had expected to hear from her. Neither, apparently did the police when he told his story. But the mass of corpses piled below at the water's edge, under which three men still lay stunned when the police eventually arrived on the scene of the massacre was exceptional. The police had been informed by the two peasants who had seen the group making their way up the river. When they reached the police station the policemen had been playing volleyball on an adjoining pitch. They didn't want to believe them, and continued with their game. 'Leave us alone! Anyway, with the little you have to steal ...' they shouted. The peasants had persevered, the police had in turn threatened them; only two hours later, when they saw tearful women running towards them, with children screaming and clutching at their saris, did they finally decide to get into their jeeps.

When they arrived at the river, they too were convinced that something extraordinary had happened that day. Never had they known of Mallahs attacking the Thakurs. As for a woman leading a gang, there had only been two or maybe three instances, going back to a time when the peasants were often starving. In any case, this mound of bodies constituted the biggest massacre ever witnessed in the Chambal Valley.

Following days and days of questioning, no one, not even

Sohan, could give a precise description of the girl who had turned up in Behmai and left a trail of blood behind her. None of the peasants in this village so like the others that surrounded it, could find an explanation for her revenge. All swore that they did not know the names left behind. The panch, village leader, ventured that the name was very common in the Valley. It was true; in Behmai itself, an old widow had the same name. For him, quite simply, the villagers had been the victims of wanton cruelty. He found it pointless for the police to interrogate them because all the villagers had lost their nerve since the drama. The next day, the journalists arrived on the scene, almost at the same time as the higher ranks of the state police. They had no difficulty seeking out the information which hit the headlines of all the Indian newspapers the following morning. Only one thing remained a mystery; the girl's name. Phoolan Devi, Goddess of Flowers was the name of the likely murderess.

## *2*

She was named after Durga Puja, which fell on the day she was born. Some say it was in 1957, others in 1961. She herself always changed her age according to the circumstances. No firm evidence was ever found. State registers were not the order in the ravines; truth and falsehood had equal weight, both being considered convenient phases in a world of illusion. On the other hand, it was unheard of to alter the star under which you were born; it was as irrefutable as a sacred text.

It happened just after the rains, in the middle of the night, at the third hour, that of Shiva's. When she came into the world, she gave the two ritual cries. The first was one of relief, signalling the end of her mother's pain. Another cry followed and announced to the village that another kind of pain had begun, one that would last long for her parents. Yet again, despite their prayers, the Devi had chosen to give them a girl. Apparently, there was a violent storm that night, and thunder struck the upper reaches of the gorges, as it does each time the earth is

about to welcome a hero. How are we to know? Every birth is shrouded in obscurity; men often resemble rivers whose sources remain unknown.

Since the birth of his eldest daughter Rukmini, Devidin, her father, had dreamed of having a son; all the more so, as he had married Moola, a widow, late, at around forty. Gurudayal, his elder brother with whom he shared the house was scornful of him. His arrogance only intensified when the second daughter was born. For a few hours, Devidin was convinced that someone had cursed him.

It was the end of September and the monsoon had been good. As usual it had reshaped the labyrinth of the ravines. The fertile earth had been washed along towards the river; it had also flowed over the fields that had resisted the deluge. Everything was lush. The houses of Sheikhpur Gura were filled with joyous women, with baskets of flower garlands, wearing colourful sarees.

The father of the newborn child finally succumbed to the festive mood. He abandoned the notion of being cursed, and when he was called to name his daughter, he did not hesitate; he named her Phoolan Devi.

Phoolan Devi was, from the day she was born, another little girl too many, and joined the hundreds of thousands of others like her found all over the Indian countryside. As soon as her mother had another child she was promptly deprived of her mother's breast. She was replaced by a third daughter and then a year later by the son desired so much. Another two daughters followed. Devi could never remember a time when she had been looked after. She grew up far from the towns, unaware even of their existence, in a peaceful hamlet, Sheikhpur Gura where life and death followed their course. People unquestioningly abided by the many rules that governed their universe. They married other Mallahs, fought and celebrated with each other, shared their meat and curries, paid homage to the Gods together and shared the same fear of the Thakurs who lived on the other bank and ruled the entire country. In Sheikhpur Gura, even fate itself conformed to the familiar rules, misfortune being predictable

but never arriving unannounced. A snake escaping to the right of a peasant out walking, or the long shadow of a widow too close to a quiet house, these were signs of impending disaster. The Mallahs constituted a very low rank among men, emerging from the heels of the Almighty Creator, whereas the others came from His mouth, arms or hips; only the Harijans had an even lower standing, as they were born from the earth's mire.

Going back to her childhood in the village of Sheikhpur Gura, no one can ever remember Devi paying heed to these rules. It was common to call her 'wild', a born rebel, perhaps one who had drunk the water from one of the fissures on the edge of the village, right where the gorges began and where, Kalimata, the Goddess of Chaos introduces men to her evil poison. Unlike Rukmini, her sister, she soon wearied of domestic work that she was expected to share. Each time she was sent to the well for water she grumbled. Only her brother found favour with her. For him she did not hesitate to lift the heavy pots and to tend the chapatis on the fire. But the rest of the time she lived in another world. She began plaiting baskets that she would never finish. She did not heed her mother and aunt who tried to teach her Mallah cooking. There was no end to her mocking her sisters, her friends or her neighbours. Sometimes, because Devi was tough, she even mocked the boys with a loud laugh and amusing words that cut to the bone; the light of cruelty in her eyes terrified even more than her laugh, a light of derision akin to that of an old man who has renounced the illusion of hope. Devi, however, found no real pleasure in her mockery. As soon as she could, she would escape from the village. More often than not she would go to the river.

Whenever she looked back on her childhood, it was the blue-green waters of this river that she saw first. Her father's house was higher up in the village, looking down over the cliffs. Contrary to women's gossip, Devi was terrified of the gorges. Her side of the ravine comprised of the last terrace, the lit slope of the village, the side with 'great waters', as the river was called.

Every now and then she was brought there to swim, but she only really became acquainted with the river the day she was put

in charge of the animals. She was shown how to drive the cows and goats down to the stream which flowed at the bottom of the cliffs, between the banks of earth to which the houses clung. When it was not dried up, it tumbled down in rivulets, finally reaching the wide confluence of the larger waters. There was no bridge at this time over the river, which wound along its course freely. The great waters were affected by the sky and the wind. If the weather was good—which was the case for more than six months in the year—they were quiet and limpid. However, in the storms which accompanied the monsoon, they ravaged the valley with large, frothing whorls, darkened by the earth ripped from the ravines. At times they rose, covering the highest point of the temple that was close to the ford, invading the niches in which the images of the Gods were placed. During a good monsoon, they did not subside for several weeks and continued to lap about the statues, eating into their blackened stone. In all weather, Devidin's small boat was moored to a tree, slightly behind the sanctuary. During the rains, travellers were few and far between, but sometimes a merchant who was in a hurry or a soldier inspecting the area would appear on one or other of the banks. He would beckon Devidin, waiting under his tree, always in the same position all year long. He greeted the traveller in silence, with slow, resigned gestures. His expressionless eyes lent him an idiotic air.

From the grassy patch where Devi had put her cattle out to graze she watched the small boat straining in the swirling waters, trembling in the middle where the riverbed was deeper. Like her father, she feared for the baggage of the merchants and the trunks of the soldiers. In a little while all she could see of Devidin was his large, white turban, his frame broken with age before time. Finally the boat reached the opposite bank, where on a good day, another traveller would be waiting.

There were also the scorching days before the monsoon, which made the river fade into long slivers of steel, exhausted from weaving between the tidemarks of sand. Occasionally, trails of camels weighed down with women and children with brightly coloured bundles piled high, would risk crossing the river. When

these nomads reached the other side of the bank, they burst into laughter; then the women rearranged their scattered skirts and sang while taking their place once more in the trail, their babies on their backs, in front of their husbands' camels.

Years later, Devi recalled these stories, narrating them in great detail, savouring every moment, changing neither a word nor the slightest intonation . 'I was taught nothing' she would sigh, when she spoke about her childhood. In fact what she really meant was that she grew up alone in Sheikhpur Gura knowing nothing of the towns that made her enemies so forbidding later on in life. In her village, she learnt about the beginnings of the world through simple fear and vivid tales; when she had the opportunity to learn about the rest, she refused.

A man, an alien, had gathered all the children over six years old under a canvas awning. He gave each child a slate and a piece of chalk.

Devi was the first to escape; her parents didn't punish her. They simply said that school couldn't possibly teach her how to be a good wife. To prove their point, they added, they had just found a husband for their elder daughter, who had never wasted her time scribbling.

So Devi went straight back to the pleasures of the 'great waters'. Each morning she felt she was throwing off the shackles of the village rules, as soon as she arrived at the edge of the river, with her cows having painted horns. It was a return to childhood, a time for freedom and play. Devi spent hours in the water swimming around and fishing, the only distraction being when one of the animals strayed from its patch. Time lost all meaning for her. When she had filled her basket with fish, and the other children had already returned home with the last of the washerwomen, she stayed idling on the banks of the river, lolling in the white sand which was speckled with fine mica and shone remarkably. She returned only when the sun had set, to face certain punishment. Of this she had no fear. Beaten and deprived of an evening meal, she dug in her heels. Every evening she continued to be the last to return home.

One winter morning, just before she left with her herd, she

saw her uncle Gurudayal leaving, driving his cattle before him. His wife and his three sons followed him. They now imitated their father's arrogant manner, holding their heads high and flinging stones at the first jackal that crossed their path. Gurudayal was leaving to move into a new and expensive house on the square, and to become the neighbour of the panch, the village head, who was a friend of his. To Devi, this move was incomprehensible. The only thing she remembers is that in her parents arguments around this time the word inheritance was often repeated.

She soon grasped the reason for this, uncle Gurudayal had managed to grab the biggest share of land belonging to their late paternal grandfather, thanks to a contract that he had held up to the lawyers, a scrap of paper that no one in the town had ever heard talk of. Devidin, as he was wont to, remained mute. Silence had become for him a kind of destiny, a total submission to his hostile fate. Even when the bridge came up, all he did was to take his boat and row until he came to his miniscule patch of ground which lay in the midst of Thakur country, his eyes larger than ever, and brooded on what some called his 'silly mistake', which was little other than his non-participation in life.

Devi can remember the same expressionless eyes the morning her mother came to the river promising her a surprise. It was soon after the birth of her fifth sister, during a heatwave. Devi was, as usual, paddling on the river bank, her hair tangled, wearing a short, half-torn dress. She didn't immediately understand why her mother had insisted on washing her, rubbing her over with perfumed oils, and even brushing her hair. While climbing back towards the village, she was seized by a blind fear. She dared to smile again only when she saw one of her aunts putting down in front of her, a box of henna paste to trace on her hands and feet designs which brought good fortune, as she had done a few months ago for her sister Rukmini.

In her mind, what followed is a profusion of vague memories. Many, many women surrounded her. The men stood behind them. In fact, the entire village must have been there. Devi stood stiffly in her sari, the first one that she had ever worn, feeling

very clumsy. She heard the crash of the cymbals and the conchs, the children squawking like never before, the men guffawing, and the elders listening to the women singing. The entire world had taken on the colours of her wedding; the red of the veil covering her face and that of the vermilion powder in the parting of her thinning hair; the crimson bindi that had been painted on her forehead before her nose was pierced with a large bronze earring; the garnet stone which decorated her diadem mingling with colour of her painted first bangles; the vermilion encircling the eyes of Kali below the shrine in the square; another shade of vermilion at each extremity of her ten arms; and finally the scarlet turban of the man who approached her, so that their cloths could be tied together—although she had, been told not to look him straight in the face. The last colour was that of the fire which they had to circumambulate seven times, while an old man muttered indecipherable words. It was the first time her parents had ever given her such a feast. Devi, without batting an eyelid, took the road leading from the river, her hand clutching the arm of the man with the red turban.

## *3*

She was just eleven years old; he was thirty one. Everything had favoured a hasty wedding. The elder daughter's marriage had been a success; at fourteen she had just become a mother. Devi's wrists were still fragile; her wedding bangles would cost less. The gifts of her future husband to her parents, a bicycle, a bed and a milk-cow, and the bridegroom himself (Puttilal, was already part of the family thanks to a previous marriage), all had to be taken into account. He was the widower of a cousin, and belonged to a genteel line of Mallahs who lived in a similar village and shared the same life-style as theirs, owning a little land and a small herd of cattle.

Devi herself was partly responsible for this event; that was her habit of spending her days alone by the banks of the river. If something unfortunate happened—and only one thing was

considered unfortunate for a girl, as death didn't count—no man would want her ever again. For once, her father was one step ahead.

Just two days before the wedding, Puttilal came to pay Devidin a visit. He complained about his loneliness; he said he needed company. Just someone to do the cooking, he begged, just to keep the house in order. Who would grind the millet in the morning and fetch his water? Who else but his legitimate wife. He would return Devi to her father each time he needed her, during the harvest, for example, or if her mother was ill. But these demands aside, he would wait for three years before really making her his wife.

Devi's father didn't argue, did not seek any assurances. They agreed instantaneously, in silence, both impatient to be done with the whole affair. So the sale of Devi was concluded, for a bed, a milk-cow and a bicycle.

Her parents experienced neither regret nor fear to see her go. She too left with a light heart, going as if on a journey, happy and curious to know what lay at the end of the road, beyond the first ridge of ravines.

Puttilal remained tight-lipped for the entire journey; which crossed several bends in the gorges, and dry riverbeds, and many small sanctuaries of the Devi. They reached Maheshpur, his village; a peculiar displeasing smell greeted her. The house had clay walls, with the same thatched roof as her parents had, put only it was much smaller. The river was far in the distance, completely out of sight. However, the house had a courtyard which opened onto the square, close to a pond where children and a buffalo splashed.

It was nothing in comparison to the splendour of the 'great waters' or to their sacred majesty, but at least it was water, with children playing in it. Devi changed out of her sari, and ran out to throw herself in with the others, laughing out aloud. With her bronze jewellery clinging like armour to her wet clothes, she rolled about in the watercress beds, scaring off the buffalo. She splashed about with the children. Suddenly, she felt someone's grip. Her laugh was strangled; she kicked and fought,

shaking her head and screaming at the same time. The arms held her firmly. Now, someone pulled her up by the hair so violently that she stumbled, and slipped into the mud. She picked herself up. A small thin woman in tatters, grabbed her by the plait and whined in a bitter voice. 'All that is over now. You are a woman. You must look after your husband.' Then she pushed her into Puttilal's house.

And that is how Devi was caught in the trap that had been set up for her weeks before. An obvious trap, like the one laid for fish which are caught in the river.

In time, she didn't know whether to laugh or cry about it, though she did add that if she had known beforehand what was in store for her, she would not have believed it. She would have left with the same confidence for her new village and the man twenty years her senior; so strong was the pull of the unknown and the charm of the road.

She lost weight, because she spent all her days looking for a way out. The black expression on her face became even more prominent. The mirage of freedom first experienced in her parents' home, blinded her; back there nobody bothered. All of a sudden, under the crude sun of Maheshpur, she now had to look at both people and things unswervingly. Puttilal had not been a stranger come to entertain her and reveal the mysteries of the winding roads to her, but simply a cruel villager, solidly built. 'He was tall and heavy' Devi recalled. 'He was imposing in every way.' From the very first night Devi slept in her corner of the terrace; her nights too lost the carefreeness of childhood.

When she looks back on this time, she swears she never cried. She does however acknowledge that her husband beat her often, and that the thin woman, his mother, did not stand aside during these beatings. They started the beatings the day after she arrived, when she had asked Puttilal when he was going to take her home to her father. Any excuse was good enough after that.

There was no shortage of them, because even if Devi carried out their orders, fetched the water and cooked chapatis and curry from the crack of dawn it was clear that she did so with a heavy heart. She admits herself that in the beginning she dented the

saucepans and threw handfuls of chillies into the vegetables, hoping to discourage Puttilal from keeping her.

The monsoon came and went, but her father didn't appear. He no longer had the excuse of flooded routes or landslides because of heavy rain. Devi became accustomed to her trapped existence, and began to imitate with great success the habits and movements of the village women. She now carried the earthenware pitchers and the baskets, gracefully; never ran anymore, even when she had no time to lose. The entire day was spent pulling out the weeds in the fields; she hated the land because it was too flat, too light, and because it didn't have the same smell as her own. She learnt how to pick up cowdung pats without breaking her bangles; to submit without breaking down. It was not very difficult. Every hour was assigned to a specific job.

On the terrace Puttilal and Devi slept in their respective corners. He never approached her, only speaking to her when he wanted to give her orders or insult her for an error she had made. Once in a while she spilled some milk, or burnt the bottom of a saucepan simply to reassure herself that he was still really there, perspiring, panting, wickedness incarnated, all the more emphasised by his silent vigil.

On days when he screamed excessively, she waited for nightfall in the courtyard, as though she were staring into a yawning abyss. At these moments the neighbouring women would keep her company. 'That's life, the way things are,' they would murmur, rocking their babies. 'Listen to us, heed our advice. Those who reject it, will soon regret it like swallowing unripe fruit.' Devi raised her eyes, succumbing to the desire to believe them, to taste some kind of hope. But she felt weak within, before these women weighed down with bangles and children, slow and gentle as custom dictated. Her mother-in-law had implored Devi to massage Puttilal's feet when she returned from the fields, and in his presence to bow before him. But although she now complied, something inside her continued to oppose and stand firmly against these traditions, but there was nothing she could do about it. It was like a black flame in

the very depths of her soul, an unquenchable fire that could be seen in her very look. At the end of the day, she began to despise these women, both young and old, who repeated the same litany every evening: 'To want everything can only bring unhappiness; to accept everything, great joy'.

Devi thought to herself that it was women like these, consenting and joyful prisoners who once clung to the temple walls below Sheikhpur Gura, their hands red with sacred vermilion powder, before they threw themselves onto the funeral pyres of their husbands, hoping by their action to become devis.

She now simply avoided them. On feast days she remained in the background, unenthusiastically plaiting her garlands, merely sketching rather than painting the frieze of peacocks and flowers which adorned the houses to bring them happiness. She knew that she was guilty, but it was stronger than she was; she enjoyed falling short of her duty; she adored being in the wrong. She felt herself to be the wronged one and in her own village she would, without a doubt, have demanded justice. Within a few weeks, she had alienated herself from the Maheshpur people's hopes and pleasure , from their anger and their dues; above all, from the children of her own age who splashed about in the water Dressed in white cotton, Devi could have been mistaken for a widow, an exceptional one because of her sharp tongue and dark expression, which marked her as one who would never give in.

Soon the only company she had, was Moti, Puttilal's niece, a year older than Devi and not yet married. She would dance beautifully, when the women played their drums and sang in the evening to entertain the children. Devi, certain that she could dance far better than Moti, was enraged that she had been deprived of this last pleasure, to sway her hips and undulate her arms as she used to, under the enthralled gaze of the village men. For the rest Moti was the one who envied Devi. At the crossroads of womanhood and childhood, Devi was sometimes amazed at the similarities between the two of them. Moti's head was filled with desire for a husband. She declared that her wedding day was not far off as she had just 'bled' for the first

time. Devi, in a fit of malice, strongly contradicted her, saying one could marry, as Devi herself had done, even before that.

Moti listened to all this, a scathing look on her face. However, the next morning she offered Devi the only present that she had ever received in Maheshpur, a young, dwarf cock. Devi lost no time making a cage for it and hanging it on her door. For once, Puttilal did not lose his temper. Neither did he protest when Moti suggested bringing him his lunch in the fields instead of Devi.

The cock actually cheered Devi up. She found it amusing to feed him, sing him little songs and to whisper secrets to him. Strangely enough, as the days passed she became used to her life in Maheshpur, as her neighbours had promised she would. Her fear of straying off the beaten path also grew.

In Maheshpur, winter is bitterly cold because of the high winds that sweep the plains. On one of these cold nights, Devi woke up suddenly. A sharp, unknown pang cut through her. She tried to scream, but a hand gagged her. She found herself imprisoned by a heaving mass of flesh, more fat than muscle, which almost ripped apart her string bed, and finally slumped onto her body like a dead weight.

She knew it was Puttilal right away. Not because of his weight, but because of his smell. The entire village smelt that way, bitter and poisonous, the breath of decomposed earth.

The following morning, Devi left for the fields without grinding the corn. The sun was up and she was wearing all her jewellery. As she was making a bundle of her bird-cage and her clothes, she made a clumsy movement and knocked over a saucepan. The racket woke up Puttilal, and he bolted upright in his bed. She didn't jump, but simply said in a firm voice that clashed with her childish demeanour:

'You had no right before the first blood.'

She did not address him formally as the custom required. When Puttilal saw her turn towards the sun which was already rising he dared not move. Neither indifference nor fatigue made him react this way. He had foreseen everything; everything but the inner strength of this young girl who already possessed a violence known only to women with a past. He wondered if, by

touching her body, he had not actually brought to life one of the Naginis, a she-snake, the elders spoke about, who unceasingly ruled the country, despite many conquerors, from their kingdoms among hidden waters in the netherworld.

## 4

Quite inexplicably, the next few years in Devi's life were characterised by great weakness, almost as if Devi was perversely required to humble herself even further in order to appreciate the reality of injustice; as though she had to step backwards before unleashing a rebellion all the more ferocious for having been suppressed. Devi was also growing up. She was hungry, incessantly hungry.

Nobody wanted anything to do with her. She had barely reached the courtyard of the house when her father ordered her to return to her husband. As she didn't move, but stood there, her arms hanging by her sides and her cock clucking in her bag, waiting for his anger to explode, he hit her.

She realised that yet again she would have to the listen to the unceasing laments of the women of Maheshpur; among them her mother, aunt and cousin. 'You had no right to leave your husband, no matter how he behaved; pain and pleasure have always been the domain of a woman's body. Go back to him. Don't stay and be a thorn in your father's side. A husband is sacred, you must love him come what may. A man is measured by his wife. It is only her care that can assure him of a better life in another world. You have no right to leave him. You must accept your burden and be loyal to him; in any case, who is going to feed you, tell us that?...' Throughout this rebuke, they vaguely pointed now and again to the bicycle, the milk-cow and the bed, Puttilal's offering in exchange for her body.

It seemed Devi had lost any worth she may have had. She was too young to become a second wife to another man who would want a child. Moreover, there was no guarantee that she was fertile. They could no longer exchange her. Nor could they

send her away, but who was going to feed her?

The next morning, in the shade of the peepal tree the sarpanch, took the final decision. The judgment was brief. As her father could not feed Devi, the task fell on her uncle Gurudayal, wealthy as a result of his inheritance and the land he had just bought with the proceeds of the last harvest. She learnt of the decision that had been taken from an old man. He asked to see her father without glancing at Devi. Devidin had been in the fields since sunrise, as he wanted to avoid the meeting. So the old man spoke to her mother. He compared Devi to a cantankerous milch-cow, and to a stubborn goat with which no one quite knew what to do. Her mother agreed. When Devi realised that she was going to live with Gurudayal, she accepted the news quietly. To tell the truth, she had indeed behaved a little like an animal. It must be added however, that she was starving.

For three months she suffered the same treatment at the hands of her uncle as she had from Puttilal. She no longer knew whether she was a cousin or a niece, a widow, a wife, or a slave. She put up with everything to ensure her corner of the terrace and her bowl of vegetables. When she happened upon her parents she threw herself at their feet. Her action was met with silence. They were incapable of holding her gaze.

Eventually, the situation came to a head when Puttilal barged into the village early one morning at daybreak. Arrogantly, he declared to all and sundry that his marriage to Devi had been a sham, and that he had come to reclaim his bicycle, his milk-cow and his bed. Devi was the first to recognise his voice. She ran out of the house, dropped her chapatis and kissing his feet cried: 'Take me away!' He pushed her off with his knee but she continued to follow him. By the time she caught up with him he was already in front of her father's house, shouting for repayment, his tone haughty, his face swollen with indignation. A row broke out, and Devi recoiled in fear. She crouched in a corner and from there she heard the news: Moti was about to have Puttilal's child and he was going to marry her.

At this point in her life Devi was not yet strong enough to

stand up for her rights. She begged Puttilal to take her back; implored him, crawled before him, even cried. She gave the impression of being more fragile than she really was; and for all we know, maybe on the route to Maheshpur she gave herself to him wholeheartedly.

True to her word, she accepted everything: the disdain of the neighbours, the innuendos of the peasants, the derision of Moti who showed off her rounded belly whenever she could. She accepted the barbs of her mother-in-law, who now admitted freely to having pushed Moti into the arms of her son the day she decided his marriage to Devi was a bad business. As for Puttilal, the constant fighting that reigned in his little harem was a source of amusement to him, the first bitter word causing him to laugh aloud.

Devi remained childless. There was no excuse: behind her trailed the shadow of little Moti, already sagging under the weight of her two babies. Devi had great difficulty controlling her rage: Puttilal took advantage of this to draw her closer to him. More often than not it happened in the countryside, as Moti had forbidden him access to the common bedroom. He would push her against a tree just on the edge of the fields, teasing her while he had his pleasure, by saying that a snake was about to fall from its branches. He liked to see her hesitate, prolong the fear and the fulfillment. Sometimes it was completely the contrary. He would take her to the bottom of the plain, to the edge of the ravines, fling her down on one of the cracks in the rock and take her quickly and silently. Then he would discard her with the back of his hand. Inevitably, he would beat her that evening.

Once again, Devi ran away. Three or four times she did this, before she realised that she was the prisoner of an unavoidable fate. Each escape resembled the one before. The rules of the game did not change. The only thing that did change was Devi's increasing will to live and her thirst for life in general. Her appetite continued to increase.

She heard nothing of the whisperings in the inner courtyards as she walked past, head held high and a dark look on her face,

as if she were about to devour the earth Devi wanted to forget this time in her life. She only has vague memories of these events, confusing dates and years. On several occasions she maintained that these comings and goings between the two villages lasted seven years—or maybe she needed a sacred figure to justify her trials, to elevate them to a religious plane, sealed by a divine will, like that which is imposed on heroes before they can gain access to heaven. Other times she was more down to earth—or just terrified by what she had experienced so young—and she shortened her hellish ordeal, saying it lasted for two monsoons. The truth is, if we believe the police reports, the her trips between Sheikhpur Gura and Maheshpur were spread over a three-year period. Three years in which to experience cruelty and also her own bitterness, for she handed out her share of insults and blows, often fighting with Moti and above all with her cousin Mayadin who continually provoked her. Unlike the others, he did not accuse her of being wild, nor of being a rebel. He mocked her young, burgeoning body, telling her that she was ugly with her narrow hips, her dark complexion and her pug nose which made her look like a mountain girl. They squabbled twice in front of the village square. The second time it was Devi who rose first with a bloody nose; but she was the winner all the same. This was something for Devi to boast about, and so she declared at the top of her voice that she was as strong as any man, and that they should think twice before attacking her So began, once more, the rumour that she was possessed by the spirit of the Goddess Nirti, ruler of the fissures through which all evil extended over the earth. The rumour came back to her, terrifying her. One last time she tried to comply with the rules that were part of the landscape since time began, a presence lighter than a cobweb, invisible to the human eye.

Devi gave in to their ploys; but they no longer wanted her. In her husband's village as well as in her own, she met with the same silent rebuff. It was almost imperceptible, a simple step backwards when she approached the well, or an indefinable reticence in the slightest greeting. She was alone; and in the villages around the ravines, to be alone was death. Besides, this

is what her mother told her when they crossed each others path one cold winter morning. Devi was living in her uncle's house, almost fifteen years old. She had grown a lot, and was frighteningly thin. Her mother came up to her, took her in her arms and cradled her like a baby. Devi gave in. Moola tried to reason with her one last time, but she pushed her away. Then her mother shot back: 'If you don't listen to me, the well is your only resort. The well or poison.'

Devi stood up, but didn't answer. She turned her back on her mother and continued to hoe the field. Moola hesitated a moment, then moved away; but she continued to stare at her daughter. A few hours later, Devi returned to the village, walking assuredly in a way hitherto unknown to Moola, despite the pots of water she carried on her head. She no longer had the air of a frail, wild animal. Erect and calm, she truly looked like a woman. That day perhaps marked the end of her childhood. In any case, a few weeks later she revealed her true colours. She had only been waiting for the opportunity. The drought presented it.

The monsoon had not been good. There had only been a few storms, just enough to clear the air and turn the fields green again; then the earth had returned to its former state. In the village, uncle Gurudayal was the only one who was not worried about this state of affairs: there was a large well in the centre of the thirty eight acres he had inherited. Irrigation canals had been dug, bringing water to the fields of the other villagers, but Gurudayal helped himself to the water before anyone else. Because there was a shortage, everyone had to depend on his willingness to ration it or not.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of the drought, he had become anxious. Every evening Devi could hear him discussing endlessly with his son Mayadin on the converted terrace above the small courtyard where she slept. The problem was Gurudayal didn't want the well to dry up before the next monsoon. Neither did he want to lose his standing in the village, his reputation of being a generous man, the only reason why he had been persuaded to take in his niece. Mayadin, on the other hand,

didn't have the same qualms as his father. He didn't understand his father's predicament at all, and each time his response was the same: 'Tell them that the well is yours. Why don't you just tell them, make them understand that you are the one who gives the orders.' Gurudayal replied, 'The thing is Mayadin, what will I do if my grass is green and the others is not? Do you have any idea how I can explain that?'

One evening Mayadin had had enough. He made fun of his father's misgivings. It was only then that Gurudayal confessed his real worry. The head of the village knew that the field where the well was didn't belong to him. The day the land was divided between him and Devidin, he had produced a forged paper before the lawyer. This fact had not escaped the other's notice. But as the village head had acted as guarantor, he had let it go. Besides, his brother had not opposed it. Not a word was lost on Devi as she sat in the small courtyard weaving a basket and waiting for the night to draw in. A month later, when the men gathered under the sacred peepal tree to discuss the drought, she left her place among the women, who were as usual huddled at a distance over their pots and pans or were sweeping the courtyards. She moved to a place under the tree, and spoke.

Nobody in Sheikhpur Gura remembers exactly what she said. In this bloody, dusty tale, the legend has with time acquired a different aspect. What is clearly remembered is how Devi took over the discussion, alone and composed amidst the men, looking like a simple country maiden, not at all like a devil. Despite her age, she spoke loudly and clearly, looking straight into their faces weathered by the sun and by the torment of the land. They listened to her without understanding because of the unexpected nature of her words, of her voice, that carried over their heads. But everyone remembered her final sentence: that she could prove that the field and the well did not belong to her uncle, that he was merely a liar and a thief. She added that she would stand behind her father and the whole village against Gurudayal and his son. That she would go as far as the town to see justice done. And that nothing could stop her now.

The people of Sheikhpur Gura were convinced that she would

indeed carry out her threats—just watching her approach the shade of the peepal tree, carried away by her own words, her young chest swelling as she drew breath, was enough. 'Small snakes are also poisonous,' muttered an old man who usually sat to the right of the village head.

That evening, as Devi finished the hard task of drawing water, Mayadin accused her, right in the middle of the village square, of having slept with the sarpanch's son. She walked ahead of him, as confident as ever, the two pots on her head not moving an inch. This only provoked him to continue: 'And my little brother too; you brought him down into the ravines! He is not even twelve years old, and I saw you together, I can prove it! You encouraged him, I can prove it...' In the square no one moved, no one rose to her defence. If this was true, it was the worst crime a woman could commit, besides murdering her husband. If, on the other hand, it was a lie, there could be no greater insult.

Devi placed both pots on the ground and threw herself at Mayadin. She managed to pin him to the ground, as she had done on previous occasions when she fought with him, even hitting him with her shoes in order to prove that she had the strength to fling back the sordid lies that he had tried to soil her reputation with. Mayadin ran back to the safety of his house, leaving her alone in front of the crowd that had gathered in the meantime. The villagers stared open-mouthed, not a single person moved to let her pass. Then the village head's son suddenly appeared out of the circle, and said in an accusing tone: 'You were more tender when you wanted to sleep with me!' He took a step towards her, attempting to caress her. She raised her shoes to hit him. Within seconds he had thrown her to the ground. She bit and scratched, but to no avail. This time she was beaten.

The peaceful men of Sheikhpur Gura could take no more. The day after, the panchayat met yet again under the sacred peepal tree, not to discuss the harvest which lay parched under their feet or the problem of the well. The sole reason was Devi.

A girl like this, who clung to life was something completely new for them.

Gurudayal took over then. First, he played his favourite role of a generous, naive uncle who had fed and sheltered a young female monster. Then he suddenly interrupted his ranting: he had just remembered a remote cousin called Ram, who lived far away in a place called Tyoga on the other side of the river, in the midst of Thakur country. He was certain that it would be no problem for him to accommodate Devi. What would happen after that, he concluded, was no longer his concern. 'What can we do with a girl like that...'

The entire village shared his opinion. It was decided she must leave the village. As usual, her father took no part in the proceedings.

Devi was quite happy to leave. She gathered her belongings, and that very day crossed the 'great waters'.

## 5

The village of Tyoga was built on an extraordinary site, at the entrance to a narrow pass. The clay walls brought together the winding trickle of a stream, to emerge abruptly onto a small plain which swelled during each monsoon due to the silt which oozed from the ravines. The people of Tyoga were wealthy, less poor, in any case, than most. They owed this to a large basin in which alluvium stripped from the gorges collected, and did not escape into the river as was usually the case. From the beginning, the ownership of this fertile land had never been disputed, not even by the Thakurs. The people of this village were discussed in almost reverential terms, which nonetheless hid a streak of resigned jealousy. With a knowing look, they kept their silence; only the policemen dared to say in low voices that the men of Tyoga were 'protected'. It wasn't due to the special favours of a God, nor even to the charms of a powerful guru. The reason was far more rooted in reality than that: for years now, maybe centuries, these people guaranteed their peace of mind by protecting bandits.

Whether it was a good year or not, the lofts in Tyoga were

almost always full. But the village was wealthy in more ways than one. You could find things here that you could find nowhere else: bright pink soap, hair oil in glass bottles, thermos flasks, illustrated magazines full of actors photographs, plastic bangles and watches, and even a tape recorder that practically no one knew how to use. They were all gifts from bandits. In Tyoga, those who plundered the gorges could always count on being saved. Even when they had robbed the poorest of the poor, the people of Tyoga stubbornly denied the truth, saying that the bandits were justices of the peace, attacking only the rich and defending the poor. At daybreak, as the women rose to grind the corn, they worked the millstone while singing songs about the legend.

It was always the same reason that lead the bandits to challenge the quagmire of the maquis. Their wife had been robbed, their sister raped, their brother beaten, their mother molested. Or they had spat in the face of a usurer or insulted a Brahmin. There had even been cases where they had come to blows because a neighbour had curled his moustache by bending his finger in a way which didn't please them. The hatred could smoulder for months or be released in a sudden outburst, surprising everyone including the angry party. There had been instances of burnt harvests, poisoned wells, even a death.

When did the string of revenges, the never-ending web of vendettas begin, which possessed the gorges? No one in the village can actually remember. More often than not, the villagers blame the river-water, swelling the expansive Chambal river upstream, replenished from the depths of the Indian peninsula. It is said that in its river-bed seeds of a greater violence circulate, that of the giants who ruled the world at the beginning of time. At the source of the Chambal where the Nagarajas, Cobra-Kings, jealously guard their secret mines of precious stones, stupendous wars were fought between the giants and Durga who refused to hand over her arsenal. Battles had been waged with ambivalent outcomes, sinister evenings of conflict haunted by despair. Upright on her royal tiger, Durga, goddess with ten arms, finally won the contest. However, the syrupy blood of the monsters

bloated the banks of the Chambal; the river waters diluted their seed. Since then it has been incorporated into the earth of the ravines where it has continued to spread its noxious elements. The peasants declared, and everything will succumb to the same fatalistic end: 'There is no way out, the devil will emerge from the ravines one day or another.' Nobody was ever capable of describing the colour or the shape of this devil. All they knew was that each year he required his ration of the male species. The renegades quickly adapted to his inhuman laws: they spent all day running through the crevices of the earth, sleeping only in burrows and searching out a new refuge each night, then attacking at dawn or dusk, stealing, raping, cutting off noses and kidnapping. They finished by signalling their crime in letters addressed to the police, marked with obscure and inimitable seals, that left no doubt as to their identity, and guaranteed their place in the black legend.

The common laws of mankind end where the gorges begin; here the rhythm of life is no longer measured in hours and days.

History itself ceases to exist as the first potholes appear in the ravines. The names that are repeated in the folk songs could be those of dacoits murdered five years ago or of highwaymen struck down by fate a thousand years ago. When a woman sings of a bandits exploits as she works her millstone, she can never be sure whether she is chanting the praises of a strangler who terrified English conquerors or a swindler who is still attacking trains, pilfering the buses and dreaming about how to traffic transistors, spare parts of scooters and videos. A few timid investigators tried to confront this almost unfathomable undergrowth of myth and reality. They came to a simple yet overwhelming conclusion: within a thousand years, the gorges had witnessed every species of bandit, that was humanly possible. It was as if this enforced trail of ancient nomads imperatively carried the seeds of crime.

As far as the bandits are concerned, there are only mistresses, never wives in their lives. Although the bandits devote themselves body and soul to the Goddess, and in all their prayers beg the Divine Mother to grant them a shred of her sublime energy, the

rules of the Valley are extremely rigorous. Men must be strong and the women feeble. Any breach of this is punished in the only way possible in the ravines: by violence and death. A sociologist commissioned by the authorities in New Delhi to study this enigma coldly states: 'Female bandits are extremely rare'. We know almost nothing of their lacklustre destinies. We only know they always have the same backgrounds, are escaped prostitutes or wives exhausted from their husbands' beatings, who become infatuated with the first blackguard they meet. In the gorges, they are put to the usual tasks of women, cooking and the hardship of fetching water, thankless jobs made all the more difficult by the continual wandering of the bands and the wilderness of the ravines. According to the gangs, women are the exclusive property of the chief or indeed of anyone who desires her, favouritism being forbidden. At the first sign of reticence or exhaustion—often due to pregnancy—they are rejected. They then find themselves abandoned to a fate which they thought they had escaped: often they end up by throwing themselves into a well. If by some chance the gangsters grant them the extraordinary privilege of carrying a gun, they will always be the last ones to receive their share of the booty; they are the first to be wounded in an ambush, being favourite targets of the police who have not hesitated on several occasions to parade in the village square, their naked corpses, sometimes swollen with child.'

Only one of these women, Putli Bai, broke the tradition—with exploits that seemed to come straight from the ancient Indian epics. It happened in the mid-fifties, in the western part of the ravines where the monsoon had carved out a chaotic landscape, as it had, ironically enough, in the plains and prosperous villages that skirted it. Putli first knew love when she was ten years old, in a brothel her mother supervised. As she was thin and agile, and had the pale complexion of the women of the superior castes, she was taught how to sing and dance, and how to entertain during ceremonies. After the show, her mother granted the one who offered the most money the rest of the evening in her arms. Soon she was in great demand. Some

men were so bewitched that they followed Putli from one feast to another, never daring to approach her no matter how wealthy they were. They were satisfied to simply cover her with bank notes and disappear into the night, tired but happy, when her show came to an end.

One day the bandit Sultan Singh saw her dancing. Since he had become an outlaw, he had adopted as his sole aim in life, satisfaction of his every desire.

One night when Putli was dancing at a marriage ceremony, he mingled with the spectators. The story goes that he waited until the company was intoxicated with alcohol and music before firing several shots, and kidnapped Putli when panic set in. It is, however, more likely that he lay in wait for her to return from her evening, and then dragged her into the ravines with impunity. To his amazement, Putli refused to grant him favours. Sultan was handsome and brutal. No girl had ever resisted his charms. It was also the first time ever that he found himself incapable of hitting a woman. To the indignation of his men, he began to shower her with presents and jewellery, he even went to Agra to bring her back foreign cognac and lipstick. Putli was moved by his attentions and finally she gave in. The day they made love for the first time, he wanted to celebrate the occasion with a profusion of alcohol; then he forced Putli to dance for the men. Soon after he resumed his life of thieving and crime. He attacked on horseback, with Putli riding pillion. She did not understand his ecstasy in the face of such carnage, nor did she understand the laws of revenge. As soon as she discovered she was pregnant, she left him. She had scarcely reached home when she was arrested by the police, tortured and raped. But she refused to speak and was duly freed. After she had given birth, she left her child with her mother and reunited with Sultan, risking that he would beat her as soon as he laid eyes on her. But as she had rightly surmised, Sultan welcomed her back with open arms. He gave her a gun and a horse, he taught her to ride, to race down the ravines, and to kill without flinching. She eventually took pleasure in bloodshed. Their band devastated the Valley, until one day Sultan succumbed to the bullets of a rival gang.

From that moment on, Putli was overcome with a craving for murder. She took her place at the head of the gang, renounced forever more her dancing, and spent her days preparing for raids, as an impassive strategist. On the appointed day she led the assault, dressed in jeans—the most precious gift Sultan had given her—but made up as she used to for her shows; she would descend on the villages singing warrior's songs which intoxicated her in the same way as strong wine would. Everything that crossed her path, was felled; sons before fathers, wives before husbands, babies before mothers. On other occasions she decided to be magnanimous and spare the poor, distributing jewellery and bank notes among them. The other heads of the various gangs wanted to become her ally, to acquire her body, her secret to combat and with it the divine force that seemed to possess her.

That was the beginning of her legend. She was already famous. Putli was, by common consent, the only woman in the Valley who had ever hardened herself in order to master the art of murder in much the same way as she had mastered the dance of love. However, from the day she lost her forearm in combat, her influence knew no boundaries; she now dominated souls. The police were continually on her trail, her name filled the magazines. At the same time she was overcome by exhaustion and she had longed to see the daughter that she had had with Sultan. She wrote two moving letters to Nehru, telling him her story and asking for forgiveness. He did not answer. So she took up her arms even more ferociously than before. One day her luck ran out and she died, twenty-nine years of age, in an ambush not even intended for her by throwing herself into the Chambal to escape from the police. The gold that she had hoarded was never discovered; the only items found on her body being a lipstick, a comb and a bottle of hair oil. The police displayed her corpse for several days in a row, carrying it from one village to the next in the hope of dissuading women tempted to follow in her footsteps, and they refused her family the right to cremate her. Her body riddled with bullets was splashed on the front page of all the newspapers, and from then on, public imagination

was captured. Tales of her life spilled over and beyond.

The police authorities were well aware of the origin of this 'popular myth'; the most ancient fantasies of India and the dreams of a confused modernity met, prompted by westerns and adventure novels. At the end of a report dated February 1958—just a few days after Putli's death—the officer responsible for the district in which she was killed indulged in an unexpected show of emotions in an official document: 'Her death wiped away all our sorrow. We will forget her cruelty and implacable harshness and remember only the exceptional courage of a woman who endured much and suffered greatly...' He concluded this report with a kind of funeral oration, optimistic and solemn, bestowing on Putli the nickname she had acquired in the songs of the Valley: 'Her companions called her the Bandit Queen, the only Bandit Queen.'

## *6*

When Devi took the road to Tyoga, she had simply been looking for refuge. Her thirst for freedom had not yet taken any real direction; it resembled a river whose banks she had glimpsed many times without ever daring to approach its waters. All she expected from the people there was indifference and enough food to eat her fill. At fifteen she had given up expecting anything more.

The rumour about her had already preceded her, but apart from Devi's cousin they knew nothing of her lineage. Proud of their wealth, they were reluctant, for many years now, to associate themselves with their blood brothers living on the evil ground of Maheshpur and Sheikhpur Gura. So in fact they received Devi with sympathy in the same way as one might receive cripples or maimed animals: what was the point of thwarting fate that tied this girl to the forces of disorder? She was deranged, which promised to be entertaining at least: unwittingly, she could even be of some use to the village. It was after all wild cats like her who usually became the mistresses of bandits.

Was it in this vein that the gentle, friendly Ram welcomed her so effortlessly? We'll never really know. Devi only spoke of him to tell that he opened his arms for her as no one in her family had ever done, and that she was happy in Tyoga. Ram was a broad and bony young man; discreet as many thin people are with an apathetic character: a shifty gait and a head that was often bent to one side, whether laden with profound thoughts or empty because of a perpetual haze of charas it was hard to say, anymore than it could be decided whether his beatific smile disguised hidden thoughts or total innocence. He spent most of his time smoking, crouched in the courtyard, staring vaguely at the crests of the gorges while his wife Lila, who was dumb and no less haggard and amiable, went to their fields.

Lila's house looked like all the houses that Devi had ever known, a room in which to cook, another to sleep in, terraces onto which monkeys jumped, a few small yards decorated with designs and bulging with animals, as well as pots that had just been scrubbed and young children. From the way Devi took in this little world of domesticity, Lila understood that the newcomer had no intention of staying long. She pointed to a herd of goats standing close together in a backyard, then tipped her head to one side to signal that she had accepted her. To finish, she passed her fingers over and over again across her lips, as though this exempted her from speaking.

This movement alone gave Devi the impression of being recognised. It was not only Lila's expression, it was also her hands, her arms and dancer's gestures. Whether she was kneading the chapatis, or plastering the walls of the house, she had the grace of a woman in love; she worked on the object as though caressing her newly born baby. In Lila's house everything possessed the beauty of the world before its downfall.

That is why Tyoga pleased Devi. It was a return to the timelessness of her childhood, to days spent in blissful ignorance. The very next day following her arrival, Devi rediscovered her oldest habit: she escaped with her cattle to the river. When she returned that first evening, a little anxious, she studied her path for distrustful looks, or the accusing murmurs that had haunted

her since her marriage. But not a single soul found fault with her. After a few days, she was back to her usual ways. When the dawn broke, she joined the procession of women walking towards the well and then left it to vanish into the steep track leading down to the river.

Until then, even in her worst moments of barbarity, Devi washed herself with the other women at the wells or ponds and always in the same way: submerged up to her waist. Groping under the wet fabric, she blindly rubbed each crevice of her body.

But one morning when she was exploring a narrow pass downstream, she came across a cove that she had never seen before, at the mouth of a waterless stream. It was a very desolate place, surrounded by thorn bushes which her goats nibbled. She had a desire to swim naked.

Once more she succumbed to pleasure, her natural leaning towards an unbridled life. And every evening it was the same. She was at peace, the world was in order: Ram continued to smoke in the courtyard with a saintly look on his face. Lila scrubbed a copper pot or drew sacred patterns on the walls of her house.

That was how things appeared in any case; the thin veil of illusion out of which destiny, before revealing itself, tends to create a secret world order. Fate on this occasion, appeared in the form of a bar of soap. It was the recent and extremely precious acquisition that a young boy from Tyoga, Kailash, had made. He was fifteen years old, like Devi. He also had married when still really a child. His wife, or rather the very young girl his parents had condemned him to live with, had just given birth to their first child. Kailash was shy; his wife terrified him, especially since she had become a mother. That day, he was returning from a village where he had conveyed information concerning the latest movements of the police to Vikram Mallah, a member of the Babu gang and one of the most powerful gangs in the Valley. By way of thanking him, Vikram handed him two transistor batteries and a perfumed soap.

Kailash was in no hurry to go home. He was a dreamer by nature. Alternatively he imagined he'd find a treasure in the

small, ancient tumble-down forts built by the rajas on the edge of the ravines, or he'd go live in town so that he could go to the cinema every day. That evening though, a very real worry occupied him: he was certain that if he showed the soap to his wife she would lay claim to it. Since the birth of their son, Sita had become arrogant, constantly clamouring for gifts. For once, Kailash didn't want to give in. He had loved this bar of soap as soon as he had seen Vikram taking it out of his bag. He didn't even try to smell its perfume, it was in fact its paper wrapping that seduced him: an acid green paper embossed with a rose and yellow medallion on which a warrior wearing an egret turban paraded on the back of an elephant. Underneath the medallion was inscribed in calligraphy which Vikram solemnly made out for him: 'Maharajah, the soap that makes men strong and women desirable.'

He decided that he would show his wife the batteries that Vikram had offered him instead. He didn't actually own a transistor. He would promise to buy her one; she would eventually calm down.

Kailash no longer hesitated, and went straight down to the river to bathe. He dried himself in the sun, and then had a little siesta. His shirt was dirty from the dust in the ravines; so he thought to himself that he may as well wash it. The stains refused to come off. He realised that the soap was not, as Vikram had claimed, of very good quality. Just then he perceived, about forty metres from where he was standing, a girl who was passing a pumice stone over her thighs, barely concealed by a thornbush. She had water up to her knees. She was also entirely naked.

'I recognised her immediately', Kailash later admitted to the reporter of The Hindustan Times, who eventually succeeded in finding him in the maze of the Valley. 'When I saw her my only thought was: she is naked, she is going to scream; she is going to run to the village and denounce me to the leader. Her cousin is going to beat me with his shoe and my name will be mud.'

The girl didn't scream. She didn't even see him. He still had time to cut and run. Kailash carefully lifted up his soaking shirt. Behind the thornbush, the girl had not moved. Standing on one

leg, her forehead wrinkled in deep concentration, she continued to pumice the inside of her thighs.

A cluster of bubbles from the shirt flowed towards her. She raised her eyes towards the track. Huddled up at the bottom of the steep slope, Kailash felt her bold gaze on him.

She didn't try to hide herself. She threw down her pumice stone and turned to face him. Then she snapped in a husky voice:

'Give me the soap!'

## 7

Within five minutes they had made love. He hadn't thrown the soap, he had brought it to her. She hadn't moved, but had continued to stare at the intruder, holding her head high, with the steady eye of a feline awaiting her prey.

He no longer knew what to do. Out of sheer nervousness he had given her the wrapping with the picture of the maharajah instead of the soap. She had grabbed it, laughing out loud, and then thrown it into the river. She had sat on the sand beside her clothes, undressed. He had then sat beside her. They had exchanged a few words, he doesn't remember exactly what about, maybe the goats who had scattered amidst the bushes, or the perfume of the soap; in turn he had undressed.

Kailash had not been ambiguous when asked about what had happened next. Many years later, he was still reeling from it. He didn't even try to hide his fear of Devi's unashamed gestures and her husky voice. Some of her ways resembled those of a big cat; she showed what others never did, said what others left unsaid. 'Her appetite was incredible, she was never satisfied; it was the first time I have ever seen that. What aroused me even more than her body, was the flow of words that came from her.'

He was impressed by her eyes: 'When she was really excited, they lit up; they were very black, with the same blue reflections horses' eyes have.' He also evoked her posture, her agility, the superb bearing that she retained even when succumbing to lovemaking. And she was lively, he said; the vivacity of a young

panther or a thieving kitten. She always took the initiative; if he once took the lead, she followed immediately.

As a result, some imagined her to be like the dancers sculpted in sandstone on the old temples. In fact, Devi probably looked like the girl we later came to know, confident of her body, unrestrained, overcome by the force that came from within.

The very first moments decided the pattern their affair would continue to have: naked love, honest laughter—her laugh which carried as far as the walls of the ravines; its echo sometimes made Kailash tremble at the peak of his pleasure. It was during these moments that he wanted to run away. But he couldn't or rather he no longer could. Devi had bewitched him like the fairy of the crevices, Nirti the wheedler, demon and goddess at the same time, whose spirit rises out of the faults in the ravines. Destructiveness and sensuality, happiness and distress, that is how Devi appeared before him on the sands of the riverbank.

From the beginning, she swore him to secrecy. He didn't have to be coaxed. She immediately turned her back to him, dressed again and ran onto the path, calling her goats. He made enquiries about her. She was not surprised. The same ritual was repeated each day, but she no longer seemed to mind the haste with which Kailash took leave, nor his air of a guilty child. She seemed to live for the moment, and gave herself up entirely to untamed pleasure.

Things were spoilt one afternoon when Kailash decided to share his greatest ambition with her. He lingered inside her, and held her tight and ready then, began to whisper in her ear things he had always kept to himself: that he wanted to leave for Kanpur and go to the cinema, to search the tombs of the old Moghul mausoleums in order to dig up gold. Devi cut him short: she demanded there and then to go and see the tombs. As soon as they were on the road that led to the ruins, Kailash wanted to turn back. He was infact a real coward. For him, to explore the tombs was simply a vague day dream not a reality; a way of forgetting that he didn't have the strength to follow his bandit friends into the gorges. What terrified him most was to be caught with Devi: the ruins stood in an open space, a few steps

away from the fields in which the women worked.

Nevertheless, he didn't have the heart to go back. The whole way along the path he tried to distract himself—to distract her too—by telling a long, simple story in which the adventures of the monsters in the jungle were confused with legends of the enormous armies who attacked the ravines in the olden days. He described the abandoned temples that he had come across, at the bottom of the gorges, where he had seen with his own eyes the reflection of deposed princes, the Nagarajas, the Serpent Kings, now banished underground as mere guardians of the treasure of precious stones. Devi didn't answer, she merely listened without asking any questions.

Neither did she bat an eyelid when they penetrated the musty vaults of the mausoleum. She just rubbed her feet on a worn stone, and said :

'I would prefer to go to the cinema.'

She had slightly mispronounced the word; it was obvious that she knew nothing about it. But instinctively she had understood that the adventure of the tombs was pointless. Kailash kept silent. So she repeated what she had said, this time articulating every syllable:

'I prefer the cinema.'

'It is far away. We need money.'

'You don't really think that by digging in there you will get rich! You would be better off doing what everyone else does, raking the fields!'

Kailash answered without thinking—fate had made its way into his voice unexpectedly.

'My wife is the one who looks after the fields.'

Devi jumped on him straightaway:

'You never told me that you were married!'

She didn't give him a chance to defend himself, she just smacked him across the face. He was so taken aback that he didn't have the strength to avoid it. She ran off. Before finally disappearing she shouted: 'You will never see me again!'

There was so much anger in her voice that he knew that she would stick to her word. The energy that had been lying

dormant in her since her birth had suddenly been awoken, and undoubtedly he had played a part in provoking it to come to life. The source of Devi's willpower was buried deep. Like all hidden sources, once discovered nothing could stop it.

Devi had been suppressed and discarded once too often. Instead of love, from now on it was hate that would protect her youth. She was enraged, the only thing left for him to do was to flee. Or give in.

Kailash first chose to flee. And ended up by giving in.

## 8

He suffered a thousand deaths. He had been convinced, from the very first day that Devi had known that he was married. How could she have closed her eyes to the very young girl who breastfed a son in the courtyard of her house? With this birth, Kailash didn't have the slightest reason to denounce his wife; and even less reason to prefer this outcast, only tolerated by the villagers for the favours she would grant them as soon as the return of the bandits was announced.

When he had interrogated the other women about Devi the very same evening of their first meeting, they had all reacted mockingly in the same way: was he really the last to know what had brought this slut to Tyoga, the last to learn that she was crazy? Kailash put on an even greater air of a gentle dreamer, the same air he assumed when he wanted to extract information from the peasants concerning the movements of the police. His questions were scattered with remarks about the drought, the monsoon which had not come, the diminishing reserves of lentils and millet in the loft; then, little by little, he brought the conversation back to the 'crazy woman'.

The more the women guffawed and hounded him with proof that Devi was mad, the more Kailash loved her. It was like the desire to swim upstream, to dream of arresting the sun, or to feel the flesh of a shadow. It was the yearning to lose himself

to the other side of life, an obstinate willingness to abandon himself to chaos. The dream itself was Kailash's greatest weakness; from the very beginning, Devi had seized it and measured its dimensions with the greatest precision. She had done everything to put herself at the centre of it and the moment he had begun to long for the impossible, she had turned her back on him.

He could no longer live without her. He did, however, try to resist and ignore her, but he had never realised that the village was so small.

No matter how far away she was, Devi dragged him down into his solitude. Until then he had lived like all the other boys of the village, scrupulously mindful of the place his family has assigned to him, of his minute role in the greater harmony invented by the gods, a fate that one was born to, from which there was no escape. The only world that he had ever truly owned was the world of fantasies which he invented when he was bored—his clutter of ghosts on the screen, of trips to town and treasure hunts—in short his shrewd talent which made him, at only fifteen years of age, the favourite informer of the gangster Babu.

With Devi, Kailash lost his realm of dreams. She had become part of it in one word, one gesture. Now that he no longer had her, he felt destroyed; deprived of everything, even himself. He had nothing more to offer her, apart from the complicity of bandits.

The opportunity arose towards the end of spring.

One evening, a rumour spread that Babu's gang had returned and were in hiding in the neighbourhood. They had to reinforce surveillance in villages where the police were posted, and above all to prepare reserves for the bandits who were exhausted and celebrating an extraordinary success: three weeks before, they had attacked a bus on the highway. They had robbed the travellers of their money and jewellery—even the peasants of their foot-rings and nose-rings. Then they had kidnapped two Brahmans. In less than a week, they had succeeded in extracting the enormous ransom that they had demanded, but not without

difficulty; one of their informers had betrayed them, and so they had been taken by surprise as the hostage's family were about to deliver the ransom. They narrowly escaped, losing however, two of their men in the skirmish. The following day, regardless of the battalions of jeeps equipped with radios that the police had sent after them, the gang had carried out a retaliatory raid in the traitor's village. Babu cut the felon's nose off with his own hands, before disfiguring his wife and two young sons in the same manner.

Everything had been reported in the newspaper. This was the first time that the press had taken an interest in Babu and his men. As Kailash had expected, he was invited to celebrate their exploits in one of their hiding places, in a tiny village called Gohani which was hidden in the folds of a ravine, about ten kilometres from Tyoga.

As soon as Kailash had received the message he ran to the river. He found Devi there, as though he had just left her the day before: in the middle of her goats, lying on the sand in the cove. For once she was dressed.

He didn't dare approach her, nor did he know whether she had seen him or not. He must have stood there for at least a minute, speechless, and was just about to leave. But at that very moment she directed her gaze towards him. Kailash reeled off what he had come to tell her: he wanted to invite her to accompany him to a party the next day, given by friends of his who lived in the gorges. They would leave long before sunrise, the road was long and arduous; They would have to wear shoes and make their way discreetly.

Kailash had run the whole way to the river and was, as a result, breathless, but he spoke to Devi in one gulp, he was so terrified of losing her attention; and as he pronounced the last word, maybe unnerved by what he had just said, it was he who looked away. He bent down by a bush, pulled off a leaf and began to chew it. Devi still didn't speak. But when he found the energy to raise his head, he realised that she had moved closer. She was beaming at him.

## 9

They left the next day, just before dawn. The path went due east; it was so easy in the beginning that trekking in the gorges assumed the cheerfulness of an expedition in the sunshine. Devi seemed to be blindly following Kailash, totally absorbed in the joy of walking. It was, however, the first time she had ever penetrated so deep into the heart of the ravines. In the most wonderful moments of her unfettered childhood, she never dared to go where the trace of man was not visible, no matter how slight the indication, or how ridiculous sometimes: the dung of a domestic animal, a few threads of material clinging to the undergrowth, tree trunks nicked in order to draw out the resin, or just stones blackened by fire. Where Kailash now took was taking her, these marks ceased to exist. He followed what appeared to be a path but in reality was composed of dried-up riverbeds emanating from many streams, crowded together, hardened through the constant pounding of human steps—it must have required thousands—but despite all that, during a good year or bad, enduring the unswerving floods of the monsoon.

The sun rose quickly, diminishing the outline of the cliffs above them. The whiter light erased the contours, obliterating the surrounding denseness. Kailash walked with the same sure step. From time to time he stopped without warning. He ran through his memory, in an effort once more to find landmarks he had come across during previous escapades: a hillock in the shape of an animal's muzzle, the outline of a summit which resembled a tool, a familiar deity; from time to time, an underground oratory of the Devi where the garlands were almost wilted. Quite often clusters of wasps buzzed around large whitish streaks left on the deity by dousings of liquor. But it was before one of these oratories, just before midday, that he took the wrong road. Once again he stopped going and tried to collect his bearings. He only realised his mistake after a while, when he saw that the outline of the mountain ridges no longer portrayed the familiar animal nor indeed any form at all: it was simply an

impenetrable chaos of crevices and shrubs.

He collapsed onto the roadside, paying no heed to the snakes or scorpions who could at any moment crawl out of the fissures. He folded his arms over his head, as though he wanted to hide. It was the first time he had ever lost his way in the gorges. His mind a blank, he wasn't sure whether it was fear or shame that crushed him. Finally, he dared to look at Devi. He had barely raised his eyes, when a violent kick landed in the stomach.

'Get up!'

The echo in the gorges was much the same as the one by the riverside, mocking and throaty. Breathless with pain he was unable to respond. A second kick, equally unexpected, followed almost immediately.

'Come on, get up!'

'Stop... When we are lost...'

'When we are lost, we don't lie down. We think.'

She then turned on her heel and left.

To lose her was far worse than losing his way. Kailash was on his feet within seconds.

It didn't take them long to find their way once more. On several occasions they came to a crossroad, where Devi chose the path they would follow, without the slightest hesitation. She never once erred.

Once, they had passed the oratory, Devi took her place again behind Kailash. She didn't put her shoes back on. He continuously felt her burning gaze on his back, ready to pounce, sharpened by their mishap, her willing to store in her memory each step she took, the most minor accident on earth. On arriving in the Valley, she relied only on herself for survival, already familiarizing herself with the ravines.

## *10*

They got back to Gohani an hour later. In the beginning, Devi found it hard to believe that they had arrived; in the ochre light of the afternoon, the ravines and human edifices were plunged

into the same earth-coloured void. It was only when they descended into the gorge that she discovered the hamlet tucked away in enormous hollow of solid earth near a temple devoted to Hanuman. Here stood Babu's den. The temple was the only thing left standing of the larger town, with its pilasters and ornate windows.

Strangely enough, the sanctuary was not dedicated to the devi, but to Hanuman the Chief of the Vanar Sena, monkey brigade, and Wrecker of Obstacles and Master of Exploits. If Babu had chosen to recuperate in the shadow of his temple, it was not because he had renounced the patron of bandits. It was because he knew the area was inaccessible to police jeeps, and even impossible to spot from their armoured helicopters—powerful machines, made in Russia, that they had recently acquired for a large sum. No matter how you approached the hamlet, even if it were from the top of the ravines, the Hanuman temple merged with the cliffs. Because he was overcautious, Babu often changed his hiding place; sometimes even his favourite informers, such as Kailash, didn't know them all. He was vigilant to the point of being obsessed, trusting nothing and no one. Even in Gohani, his orders were stringent: besides the guards, nobody was to hang around in front of the temple.

At the entrance of the sanctuary, came a familiar smell: it was of Mallah cooking. Then, as she walked behind Kailash through adjoining underground rooms, she smelt something else, something that also wafted through the oratories in the ravines: alcohol.

At that moment, she could have run away. The time had come once more, as it had the day Kailash had played with the idea of rummaging in the tombs. The reason was because alcohol—or that liqueur in any case with its sugary stench—was the trademark of the baghis; it was more reliable to find their trail with that, than the convoluted marks with which the gangsters sealed their invective messages to the police after each foray. Kailash is absolutely sure of one thing: Devi could not have been unaware, even if he had avoided telling her during the entire adventure, of who his friends were. He presumed that

by meekly following him into the gorges, Devi had understood where he was taking her. What's more, she had asked no questions.

But she was like that, Devi; it wasn't just her casualness that incited her to adventure, or the irresponsibility that goes with being fifteen. She had always needed a stronger life, a greater freedom. She didn't turn a hair when she saw Kailash bowing before the three men who were patrolling the steps of the sanctuary, machine-guns on their shoulders, their waists thickened by a bullet-pouch. Neither did she shudder when they crossed the rooms of the abandoned temple, in which the idol of the Hanuman was the only thing that was preserved, enveloped in vermilion and covered with offerings. She had been undoubtedly both blind and naive, the day she fearlessly entered this den which was similar to a hovel, where she leaned over for the ritual salute before the unknowns, with hair of steel and gnarled faces. There were about twenty of them, all armed, dressed in police uniforms with gleaming badges, sitting in a circle around a petrol lamp. They were stuffing themselves with various meats and plates of rice, hollering and drinking loudly to the strains of a portable harmonium held by the only man with a face, among all the other faces worn-out before their time, which manifested the remains of youthful grace. His name was Vikram, and before Kailash sat down by his side he introduced him to Devi as his best friend.

She remained in the background, still undecided, almost reticent as though surprised by this strange, dark fraternity. In the adjoining room she had glimpsed shadows of women, stooping over pots and braziers as they did everywhere else; she still wondered about her place in all this; in the circle of men where her lover sat, or in the humble chain of women subjugated by menial although saintly tasks which had been their lot since the beginning of time.

Kailash finally decided for Devi. He grabbed her by the arm, and firmly sat her down between himself and Vikram. She didn't resist. On the contrary, she straightened up, instilling certain pride in Kailash, a certain pride about her self-esteem. He didn't

see what it represented though, this self-esteem.

And so the night began in this sombre den, imbued with male sweat and the stench of spices. In the half-light, Kailash intertwined his legs with hers. After a few minutes she also felt on her arm a persistent, rhythmic weight of another leg. It was Vikram who was amusing himself by tapping in time to the rhythm on a part of her skin left uncovered by her blouse. She didn't push him away; she didn't even wonder whether they were accomplices, whether they had already begun to fight over her. For the first time in an eternity, she had her place in a circle in which the pleasures of the same food were shared. She only had to stretch out her hand to eat and drink. The warmth of others became once again uplifting, the world regained its tenderness, the brutality of time forgotten; she was hungry, hungry and thirsty like never before.

It was Vikram who offered her first glass of alcohol. She reacted in a way that she had been taught a long time ago in Maheshpur, when her mother-in-law tried to teach her the art of modesty: she lifted the edge of her sari and placed it in front of her mouth, lowering her eyes. Then she took the glass and swallowed the liquor, rolling the drops on her tongue like a wary cat who tastes, however, each gulp. A few men guffawed; one of them cracked an obscene joke—it was Babu, fat and stodgy, who must have been the leader of the gang, as he wore the most impressive rifle on his shoulder. Devi raised her eyes, and threw back her veil. She held his gaze and then she too began to laugh, full throated and honest.

Kailash now became afraid. Surreptitiously, he caressed Devi's shoulder to convey that she had nothing to fear as he was there; but it was also to let the others know that she was his property; that they must neither scorn her nor provoke her.

At that very moment Vikram stopped brushing against Devi's arm. He concentrated on the keyboard of his harmonium and struck up another song.

It was a bandit's lament, a sad and noble song of the Men of the Valley, never-ending, never faltering. It recalled from the beginning, the web of revenges, the legend of the Great Raju

the rebel king who fled from Delhi, the first one ever to hide in the ravines and who then married a shepherdess he found on the bank of the river. Throughout the night, Vikram rendered the age-old story of the baghis. Sometimes he started up a refrain, the bandits all joining in while he stopped to catch his breath. From time to time, Babu prolonged the pause by telling a story about a raid. One anecdote led to another, a different bandit continued with yet another episode, tales followed one after the other with nothing in common apart from the pleasure taken in counting the banknotes, and spilling blood. Severed noses, whipped and raped bodies, exploded brains: to hear them you would think they had never retreated, never known fear. They rarely spoke about their defeats.

In the middle of the night, as the lamplight was fading, a dumpy man who prided himself on having been a soldier during the war against Pakistan embarked on a story about a battle of tanks. It didn't have the same appeal as the other stories, as several men nodded off. Vikram took pleasure in waking them by striking a piercing, sustained note on his harmonium. All of them sat up, wide-eyed as if they had been roused from a nightmare.

Above all, according to Kailash, that evening was the very first time that Devi heard from Babu, the story of Putli Bai: 'She listened open-mouthed. I already knew the story of the Bandit Queen by heart, like everyone else did, and Devi made me feel ashamed, hanging on to every word that fat idiot uttered. I discreetly nudged her thigh with my knee, but she didn't respond, or at least she pretended not to. And Babu continued to add on to the story as he told it. A few hands were cut off in one episode, girls gutted in another, kids roasted on spits, balls hung from trees, scattered all over the place. It created the impression that Putli had ten arms like Durga and that she had spent her life impaling men. The worst part of it was that the more Babu invented, the more Devi looked dumbfounded. She just couldn't believe it. It went straight to her head. She was already a part of it.'

As might be expected, Devi's version differs from his. She

doesn't deny that that evening was the first time she had heard of Putli Bai. But she is also quick to add that she had never touched alcohol before then either; the liquor had intoxicated her. She had rapidly lost track of the difference between reality and illusion, between Babu's stories and her own dreams. Most of the night she dozed between Kailash and Vikram, until the dawn broke, when Babu announced that he would begin sharing out the booty. She claims it was at that moment she realised she was among bandits and became afraid. This is obviously not true; because at the very beginning of the meal, the booty had been ceremoniously carried in, in large, jute bags that had been emptied out to the right of Babu.

The division of the booty began by distributing the cash. This followed a simple rule: the more powerful the weapon you carried, the greater was your share. Straightaway, a part of the proceeds was allocated for the next expedition. With a signal from Babu, each bandit came, from the highest-ranking to the most humble, bowed before Babu and kissed his feet, touching the ground with his head, then received his wad of rupees without a word. Following the distribution of the bank notes, Babu turned to the pile of objects that had been plundered from the bus and tapped the ground with the barrel of his gun as if to indicate that he overwhelmed not only his men with the bulk of his force and will-power, but these objects too. Then he began to sort out the articles.

This took at least an hour. It was the usual enormous jumble of things following a raid on a train or bus: jewellery and watches, lighters, bottles of fizzy fruit-juice and Cola. Bed-covers, shawls, duvets, a large bundle of cinema magazines, in fact all the things that Babu must have considered the most valuable as he set them aside on a bed of plastic bags: wedding bangles, a few gold teeth, an electric razor—obviously already stolen from a pickpocket returning from a big town —, felt-pens, gas stoves, ornate saris, about ten lipsticks and boxes of mascara, an impressive amount of tin cans and plastic utensils, the material of which was so up-to-date that it aroused a common greed among the men.

Babu kept the most beautiful watches, some of the jewellery and cosmetics, as well as a substantial number of utensils for himself—undoubtedly he hoped to make a good deal with them later on when it was time to stock up on fresh supplies of ammunition in the markets of Gwalior or Agra. For someone who only carried a semi-automatic rifle, Vikram hadn't done too badly, Devi noticed: he had received a duvet, two watches and five containers. She also noticed, however, his strained face when he stood up after bowing to Babu, in gratitude.

Then everyone set to eating, drinking and singing once more. Kailash no longer remembers at what moment he left Babu's den. He can only recall the sun was already high in the sky and a ray of light had fallen on the vermilion-coloured statue of Hanuman in the neighbouring room; its orange light cast its glare in his face. He rubbed his eyes, and felt the warm arm of Devi against his stomach. Standing up, he shook her and, whispered at the same time: 'We must leave'. She rose almost immediately; she looked so lively that he thought she hadn't slept at all.

Lying right beside them Vikram, in turn, then also stood up, as though alerted by some unseen signal. Kailash pushed Devi out of the room. From a corner came the sound of rustling material. Arms and legs moved with the slow gestures of a tired swimmer. It was the women who had prepared the feast and cleared up, and were now entangled under their veils, asleep yet watchful, ready to serve, as always. Devi stopped in front of them, and whispered to Vikram: 'Are they going to stay with you?'

A few men turned over on their mats, others stopped snoring. Kailash murmured once more: 'We are leaving'.

The vein on Vikram's neck was beating with increasing rapidity. He readjusted his non-commissioned officer's jacket on his shoulders so brusquely that the ring he was wearing on the index finger of his right hand caught in a button and almost ripped it off; to cap it all his feet banged into his harmonium which emitted a jarring sound.

Kailash pushed Devi towards the Hanuman. Vikram followed them. He overtook Devi, leaned against a pillar in front of the temple and eventually snapped:

'We will find the women when we come back. It is too hard in there.'

Devi felt a small noise welling in her throat, a kind of giggle that seemed to surge from the very depths of her being. Then she announced, while arranging the folds of her sari:

'We are leaving, but we will be back.'

It was neither a word of consolation nor a provocation; just a phrase uttered with calm conviction.

'That's easy to say,' Vikram muttered.

'So? Why not?'

'We are leaving again in two days. We are returning into...'

He indicated the ravines, trying to smile, but his mouth was pinched with bitterness. Devi started to stare at him, it looked as though her eyes were getting bigger by the second. Then she gave her famous laugh, the unexpected one, a kind of laughter that bursts forth, without her laughing, and which created a turmoil, a fear in all around her.

Kailash bounded towards the end of the parvis. He was impatient to leave. All of a sudden, Devi, happy with the effect that she had made, moved forward between the guards into the blazing sunshine in front of the temple; taking the risk of waking up the whole gang she said to Vikram:

'We will see each other again, you can be sure of that!'

And she darted off towards the end of the ravine, opposing the guards, Vikram and the entire world with her young, superbly rigid back. She ran straight into the maze of gullies, not looking to see if anyone was following her, facing the threat of snakes and the sun which struck her face, her step more confident than it had ever been.

## *11*

The return trip had been very gloomy. As soon as Babu's den was out of sight, Devi had allowed Kailash to walk in front of her and their pace had slowed down. Any joy in the adventure had evaporated; they were also tired because it was night. Until

they arrived in Tyoga they didn't speak a word to each other.

'You can tell me now. Who were those guys?'

She spoke to him without looking, as she always did when an idea struck her. He knew she would persist until she received a reply, but he chose not to respond. Perhaps it would be better for him to cut and run; but he thought to himself, that before even reaching the village, he would only want to come back to her. Besides, she wasn't letting go.

'So spit it out!'

'There is nothing to tell.'

'Yes there is.'

'You must be joking!'

'I want you to tell me. Who were those guys?'

'But you know!'

'They scare you, don't they!'

For the second time Kailash thought he would run home, but he remained rooted to the spot. He heard himself mumbling:

'Bandits, alright! All bandits...'

He passed in front of her. He felt her exulting behind him, at the same time realising that he wouldn't be let off so easily; a minute later, he heard her shouting:

'Bandits! And you then, what does that make you?'

He swung around, jumped on her and hurled her into the dust.

'Do you really want to know?'

She didn't answer. One of her sandals had slipped into a crevice, trailed by a tiny avalanche. Kailash was blind with rage:

'You want to know?' he bellowed again., 'A husband! I am only a husband!'

He grasped a stone, threw it at her foot, and ran. He had hardly covered ten metres when he heard Devi calling him:

'What a pity, Kailash... What a pity that you aren't mine!'

Her cry resembled a moan, a cry of pain and compassion, the sound of love itself, or what passed as it. He came to an immediate halt, and turned around. She was crouched on the ground, still rubbing her ankle, her sari half undone, her blouse

awry, revealing under her armpits a fragment of lighter skin. As always, he found himself without any energy or will-power except maybe to go back to her, to find her sandal in the crevice where it had fallen.

'Be careful of your sandal,' he whispered, sliding it back onto her foot.

She raised her eyes to him, surprised, and asked, 'Why?' in a voice with more than just a little tenderness.

'We are going to town,' Kailash replied.

'To town?'

'We are going to get married.'

With this, he placed his head at Devi's feet. He only knew abandon and suffering, submission and humility. She didn't move to caress his cheek, not even to touch his hair. But when he stood up, the same look was on her face as when she had faced Vikram, the same deep, dark eyes, opened wide. Kailash felt hopeful once more and continued in a voice which had, without warning, become more masculine:

'We will leave tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow for town, to Kanpur. What must be done has to be done. Papers, authentic papers. I will bring some money. Let's meet again in this very spot; at the end of the night.'

She didn't seem to grasp what he was saying. He took advantage of this fact to escape; and that day he ran with a light heart in the direction of Tyoga, because for once she was wordless. She could only watch him leave as she rubbed her ankle, her look dulled and her mouth rounded like when she had listened to Babu's stories.



Kailash came back, as he had promised to do, just before dawn, before the village came to life. He seemed to be proud, a little too proud maybe. He was carrying a torch and a plastic bag into which he plunged Devi's hand. It was filled with bank notes. She didn't ask him where he had found them. She was satisfied

with what he told her: 'It is the money for going into town'. Then she followed him in the dark.

They crossed through a field. At daybreak they penetrated a pathway that Devi wasn't familiar with, just at the place where the ravines begin. The track quickly became wider, its slopes gentler and then out of the blue, the horizon opened up. The roar of an engine was carried by the wind. It was the road. They branched off towards the north, and hurried along. It was not just the joy of another day, but also, in the dusty pink of the morning, the pleasure of abandoning all to the river flowing towards the town. A capricious stream of animals and humans, machines, carriages, became more abundant as time went by, a chaotic tide carrying everything along, scooters and camels, bicycles, buffaloes, overcrowded buses, cheerful nomads returning to the desert, of every cast and tribe imaginable, of every age, all reaching for a dream only they alone knew.

The trip took them one and a half days. On the first evening they slept on the side of a path in the shadow of a dilapidated caravansary. In the middle of the night, Devi felt Kailash pulling her towards him. She pushed him away saying 'When we have the paper'. He didn't insist, but the next day he decided to finish the trip by bus. They arrived around midday in the centre of Kanpur, just beside the Grand Cinema.

At that moment, things became more complicated. By the way Kailash behaved, Devi understood that he had never set foot in a town. He allowed himself to be pushed about, he tripped, continually lifting his head as if he were still in the ravines looking for landmarks that didn't exist. He appeared to be dumbfounded and restless at the same time.

She decided to stand by her decision to get married; and to get what he had promised her: a paper. For once, she resolved to say nothing and to follow him without batting an eyelid. It was the right thing to do: having wandered around the never-ending alleyways leading off the Grand Cinema, Kailash finally discovered the workroom of the man who could get him everything, a certain Ragu, who was the most precious link in Babu's gang. In the guise of repairing engines, he negotiated

ammunition and guns for the gang, then fixed them up; when required, he could even make them himself.

He was amazed to see Kailash appear. He pointed his forefinger at Devi. 'Leave her alone,' Kailash growled, 'I am here on her behalf'.

Ragu took one step forward, ready to strike:

'We don't speak in front of women.'

'I have come for a favour, Ragu. The others told me you know a lawyer.'

He stretched out his palm, like a beggar. Then he shoved Devi in front of him; and as Ragu still didn't answer, Kailash continued:

'Just a little favour, Ragu, not too much. A marriage contract. I want to marry her, and I need a contract, a real contract from the town. I have enough to pay for it.'

Ragu's eyes narrowed, he weighed Devi up, glancing at her from head to foot. Devi didn't try to impress him. She lowered her gaze, taking refuge in Kailash's shadow. Ragu carried on staring at her, then gestured to them to enter his workshop, a kind of greasy cesspool where disemboweled engines and sheets of iron overlapped under a roof of corrugated metal.

Kailash turned to face Devi:

'Go on, leave me alone.'

With this he pushed her into a yard behind the workshop where a few women were chatting. Devi sat down in a corner, without saying a word, a corner of her sari pulled over her face. They spoke in low tones and she had difficulty following the conversation. Not for one moment did she doubt Kailash. She was sure he would get what he had come for. She discerned that Ragu dragged his feet, argued and quibbled. Kailash stood up to him, argued inch by inch in never-ending sentences.

Kailash listened to him, nodding his head; then he ran into the yard to join Devi. He simply murmured: 'I will be back,' and he ran off between the pools of oil.

He eventually came back as night was falling. She had eventually fallen asleep, bundled up in her saree on the floor. When Kailash shook her, shouting that everything had been

arranged and that all that was missing was her signature at the bottom of the marriage certificate, she was so dazed that she didn't comprehend anything. She could only answer: 'I don't know how to sign.'

'Do as I tell you', Kailash retorted. He had the same boastful eyes as the day before, when he had emerged at the night with his plastic bag stuffed with notes.

Everything happened just as he had said it would. However it happened even too quickly as far as Devi was concerned. She didn't know why, but she had imagined it would be something more like her first marriage. She thought that the lawyer would be located in a temple with sticks of incense and a picture of a god with swaying garlands. Instead of that, she found herself in a tiny office, in front of an old man flopped onto a rickety chair, his face turned towards a fan which shuffled the papers that had accumulated on his table.

The man adjusted his filthy glasses on his nose, spluttered to himself, a ritual that seemed satisfactory to him, read the paper one last time following the letters with his finger, then raised his eyes towards her—a glazed look which the thickness of his glasses blurred further still—and asked her to sign. She didn't move an inch. Kailash became impatient and pointed to a blank space at the bottom of the paper. So she stood up leaning against the bars of the chair:

'You are the man, Kailash? You begin.'

The old man giggled when he saw Kailash seizing the pen. He must have spent several months in school because he knew how to use it perfectly well; he swiftly scratched a few intricate forms. Then he handed the pen to Devi. She took it, imitating as best she could the position of his fingers, then began drawing something that she had learned during her childhood, a star motif which draws the blessing of the gods to the home. She was taking too long over it; the lawyer grew impatient, pulled the sheet away from her before she had finished, in order to shower it with official stamps. To Devi's enormous chagrin, one of them almost obliterated her attempt at a signature.

When the old man had finished with his stamping—it had

taken quite a long time as he had solemnly applied himself with the utmost care to the task at hand—Kailash put several wads of rupees on the table. The lawyer counted them over and over again, then turned off the fan, the neon tubelight that lit his office, and handed over the certificate.

Kailash buried it at the bottom of his plastic bag. Once outside, they found themselves back in the frenzy of the street and Devi suggested it might be a good idea to keep it in his shirt pocket. He agreed, and half-opened the bag. It was then she noticed that there were still a few wads of notes left. So softly she uttered; 'Now let's go to the cinema.'

## *13*

They actually did go to the cinema. They spent the evening there and the next two days also. Between each showing they went back to Ragu's home where they made love in a small lean-to at the far end of the workshop. Then they slept. Devi passed the time gorging herself with ice-cream. She was so crazy about it that she hardly ate anything else for these three days.

Kailash was the first to bring up the subject of returning to the village. When he told Devi that he had no more money left, she didn't turn a hair. He felt obliged to add:

'I have the certificate. No one can harm us. No one. Neither my wife nor my parents.'

Devi confronted him with the same silence, laden with threatening undertones or indifference, he wasn't sure which. He insisted:

'My wife has no paper.'

She still didn't answer; she simply went into the yard to wash herself and oil her hair. Next, he saw her taking a small mirror and several sachets of powder from the folds of her sari. Now she painted the coloured motifs typical of all new brides in the villages of the Valley on her forehead.

'Are we going?' she barked at Kailash.

He had never seen her looking so radiant—nor so arrogant.

He thought she wanted to return to the cinema. He tensed up and stuttered:

'But the money... We don't have enough anymore...'

'We don't need the bus, we will go on foot. We are no longer in a hurry, now that we have the certificate.'

That was when he realised that she was willing to go home.

During the entire trip, she kept up her airs of being a princess. Kailash remembers she had the same aplomb as the film heroines. A strange mixture of gentleness and implacable pride, she was womanly as she had never been before; and as far as he was concerned, it wasn't love that made like this, nor even the marriage certificate. It was the cinema.

They had been to every cinema in Kanpur. In these dark caves she had seen intoxicated villains, degenerate princes who tortured their serfs, helpless servants beaten up then saved, sharecroppers starved by their greedy masters. Unreservedly, along with them, Devi was afraid, hungry, hopeful and desperate, right up until the moment that she was convinced, when the screen was switched off, that everything came to an end, and that end was called justice. She believed in it with her heart and soul, as much as she believed in the devi. She made all these stories, which inevitably ended in happiness for the righteous, her own story, with heroes appearing from nowhere, steeped in glory—perhaps they came from the mountains where the Gods ruled, because they never had money or family, only guns or daggers.

So Kailash remained convinced: Without the cinema, Devi would never have wanted to come back to Tyoga. She had already suffered a great deal, she would have been distrustful, for it was in her nature. At the very least, she would have looked for reassurance on nearing the village, for promises and proof. But she really believed that her own story had ended, finished, as it had in the films, with the recognition of her right to love and to live. She now felt that she had found her place in the link created by the gods to maintain order in the world, in the compact mesh of descendants and castes. Kailash, in contrast became increasingly fearful as they drew closer to the ravines:

had his wife noticed that her ceremonial jewellery had disappeared from its hiding-place? Had the moneylender in Tyoga to whom he had hastily pawned it, noticed the fact that he and Devi were no longer there and spilled the beans? Had he talked about his visit in the middle of the night, his obstinate refusal to bargain?

Kailash's anguish increased as the gorges narrowed along the track. He was ready to leave, with no future other than the town and the certificate, no plans other than to keep Devi at any price. He prayed that his father would be fooled by the paper covered by official stamps, that he would presume it to be a real certificate, an authentic paper from the town, according to the proper form.

Devi entered the village with such a swagger that all those standing in the doorways and the courtyards were flabbergasted. They went straight to Kailash's house. Sita, his young wife, was in her usual place under the awning, grinding corn, her baby tied to her back. It was over in a second: Kailash pointed out the threshold to Devi and gestured her to go in. She pushed open the door. Bent over her mortar, the other woman saw nothing.

It was the child who alerted her. He began to twist and turn on his mother's back. Sita wanted to straighten the fabric that held him in place, but she lifted up her head just as Devi was crossing the threshold. Her pestle, dropped.

She dashed into the house. Kailash tried to intervene but his wife was so angry that she managed to push him away. He went outside, no longer daring to move. For one indistinct moment the crash of metal containers could be heard coming from the house, a few scraping noises on the earthen floor and smothered cries. Then Sita barged into the yard, her sari undone, her cheeks scratched. She knelt before Kailash and kissed his feet. He didn't allow himself to be swayed and pushed her off: 'Go away, I don't want you anymore.'

'I am going to pull out her eyes!' Sita hiccupped. He tried to shout louder than her: 'Go away, I married her. I have a certificate, a real one from the town!'

The word certificate silenced her. In the sombre doorway,

Devi's red sari passed by—it was as though she had already taken over the place; with that, Kailash joined her without as much as a glance at his son.

Sita sat down under the awning—or rather she slowly sank down against the wall, deprived of all energy. She closed her eyes; it would seen she had fainted or was dead. A long scream escaped her. It was neither a shout nor a sob, but a kind of never-ending growl, a hoarse sound, rasping, the oldest cry of women, of tribal daughters in the forest when their men are dead or have abandoned them. A cry of anguish and warning, which had the intended effect: one minute later, the entire village was in the courtyard.

There was general uproar, interspersed with insults. The baby started to whimper. Between his crying fits, the words jewellery and dowry could be heard. Kailash bellowed so loudly that he was out of breath. He repeatedly pounded out the same lines, about a lawyer and a marriage certificate. His mother in turn responded in the same way, telling him there was only one law, that of the village, which was worth all the sham of the town; the proof was precisely that it remained unwritten.

Outside Sita cried in short little sobs, halfheartedly, giving the impression, that she knew the result was going to be in her favour. In effect a man turned up jostling the crowd of villagers, an old man out of breath who must have been disturbed in his field because his hands were full of mud. From the moment he entered the house, no more screams could be heard; and Sita herself, still in the courtyard, stopped snivelling.

It was Kailash's father. He began to speak. His voice was hoarse but firm, the voice of a man who has always known how to make people obey. He didn't shout or pontificate. He simply reminded his son that Sita had given him a boy. He asked him to hand over the paper for which he had gone to town. Kailash refused. So his father went to the doorstep and declared in a way that gave the impression he was addressing all the villagers milling in the courtyard:

'Well go and live with your whore. But get out of here. Never bring her here.'

His arm pointed in the direction of the ravines. Kailash took him at his word. He walked out of the house without delay, his arm tucked under Devi's.

When Sita saw them side by side, and noticed the designs that Devi had painted on her forehead, she began to howl. Once again, her mother-in-law forced her to calm down by grabbing her by her plait; then she spat on the ground, on the very spot which Devi had just walked past. Most of the women followed suit, and even some of the men including Kailash's father. The whole business didn't seem to have upset him greatly, because he sat down quietly in the doorway and took out his hemp pipe; then he sniggered as addressed his daughter-in-law:

'In less than three days time, he will be back in your bed.'

He was mistaken, but only just. At the end of one week spent in the ravines, Kailash declared that he was going back to his wife. It happened in the cove where they had met, where their whole affair had begun, as Devi was about to bathe. 'I need a house, he said by way of an excuse, when I sleep, I need a roof over my head.' Devi said nothing at all. She lowered herself into the water in the way she always did, at a measured pace, slowly trickling water over her shoulders. He took advantage of the situation to run off as fast as his legs could carry him. As soon as he thought it was safe, he slowed down, stopping behind a bush to catch his breath. He hadn't seen her coming out of the water, dressing herself once more, climbing up the cliff in small discreet bounds that were so quick and light that she managed to jump on him just before he could set off on the road leading back to the village.

She threw him to the ground, forced him to swallow a handful of earth and finally stuck her thumbs into his sockets. Over and over again through gritted teeth she repeated: 'For that, I will kill you.'

'I had never experienced so much hatred in a human being', Kailash invariably concluded when coming to the end of the story of his affair with Devi. 'She was like no other woman I knew, not even like another human being. For her, words meant something. To be married meant to be married, to kill meant

just that.' Devi had no gun. She let Kailash fall back into the dust.

That same evening she returned to Tyoga. Silently she took her place in the house of the dumb Lila and her cousin Ram, who was still innocently smoking his chilum in the courtyard as if nothing had happened, as if nothing could possibly happen that would change the order of things. And the truth is, the very next day things were back to normal, Kailash with his wife who had been chosen for him, Devi with her goats following the paths which led down to the river.

From the moment she returned to Ram's house, the void that surrounded Devi became greater still, although for a long time now, she was used to grabbing moments of happiness whenever she could, to sneaking away to enjoy the scanty pleasures whose worth only she could appreciate. She persisted in roaming the ravines and swimming alone in the coves. She left earlier and came back much later. Above all she avoided going past Kailash's house. Destitute, her only hope was one day to overcome her desire. That is, until one evening, just before the monsoon, she came across the first man who had abandoned her, her father Devidin.

## *14*

He was wild-eyed, ready to do the first thing that came into his head. The harvest had been worse than ever before. To survive he had been obliged to rent his services to two Thakur landowners, and endure the shame of hoeing the land of others. After several sleepless nights, at the end of his tether, and completely resigned to his fate, he eventually decided to get back on his feet. He had the deeds of the land inherited from his father read to him by a priest from a neighbouring village. They proved beyond all doubt that the field in which the well stood was his. So Devidin pulled himself together. But it was in a way particular to those whose spirits have been broken for a long time.

He remembered the day his daughter had harangued the

entire village, under the sombre leaves of the sacred peepal tree. He had difficulty recalling every word she had used; he didn't like words; he did, however, remember her firm voice which carried far.

From the rumours which inevitably ended up by crossing to the other side of the river during the baking heat of the dry season or during the heaviest rains, he had heard about Devi's escapade with Kailash. He had not been surprised, had even drawn courage from this fact. Nevertheless his search for his daughter was not out of remorse and above all not out of affection. It was because she had the strength that he now required.

Little is known of their reconciliation. From the day her father went to meet her on the Tyoga road, we lose track of Devi. We only find her once more in January 1979, under her family's roof in Sheikhpur Gura, her birthplace. She was almost eighteen years old. Within twenty months she had obtained what her father wished: his rights to the field with the well.

Until her wild adventures were over, Devi kept the original copy of the verdict. The kind of expedition it entailed to procure it can be deduced from this. For months on end, accompanied by her father, she went to office headquarters and tribunals. Together they faced the indifference of petty clerks, the deathly quarters of policemen, pernickety penpushers and quibblers. They lived on the roads, sleeping outside in all kinds of weather, under the heavy showers of the monsoon and the cold spells of January when the mountain winds cut across the plains. Each time her father won the case. Just as often, Gurudayal contested the verdicts. Neither the daughter nor the father lost heart, however. From the tiny courthouse in Auraya, a small town built upstream, they went in search of recompense to the courthouse in Kanpur, to higher authorities, and even further still to the big town of Allahabad. This last verdict was not appealed.

We know nothing about their return to Sheikhpur Gura. If they celebrated, their joy must have been short-lived; we learn of Devi's whereabouts after that only through a subpoena drawn up by the local authorities of Kalpi during the first few days of

January 1979. Kalpi is mainly a large market town set well back in the ravines, on the highest point of a plateau. It is important for its market but better known for its sanctuary dedicated to Shiva, the God of a Thousand and Eight Names and five Attributes, all-powerful God of Life and Death-giving forces, Master of Sleep and Destructive Weather. Legend has invested this temple with considerable and equally mysterious powers. The architecture itself is incredibly strange: the sanctuary rises out of the middle of a huge esplanade, to the right of an ancient palace, overburdened in the fashion of a Sicilian palazzo, with terraces and statues eaten away by lichen. The entrance to the temple is defined by two enormous cobras of annular stone, standing opposite one another. Yet no guide, or any scholarly records of Indian antiquity mention this temple. Even in the bright sunshine during the dry season, this place instilled terror in those that visit it. The first writ brought against Devi in this sinister place, relates in an additional clause that three policemen ventured across the gorges that lead to Sheikhpur Gura the same evening in a jeep, in order to notify the daughter of Devidin Mallah that she was under arrest, accused of robbery. The same report states that she was imprisoned immediately. Conclusively, it mentions the name of the plaintiff: Mayadin, Gurudayal's son, her cousin and her worst enemy.

# PART II

That is when everything came full circle. A destiny that had lingered in the background finally revealed itself, and followed its course. A rising level of bare fact. One could only succumb to its irrepressible tide.

Devi was pushed into the jeep and brought to the police station in Kalpi, where the mandate brought against her and concerning her arrest was read to her. She protested her innocence. She knew her cousin's house had been broken into, but she assured them that she was in the fields at the time of the crime. The police were not interested. She was locked in a cell to await prosecution in the courthouse of Auraya, the town closest to Kalpi. It was the same office where a few months earlier she had won a case on behalf of her father. On her second day there, one of the policemen, a certain Mansukh, tried to rape her. However, her resistance was such that he gave up. Later, she learnt in his office that the charges brought against her not only came from her cousin, but also from Krishna, the seniormost member of the community whose word was beyond all doubt because of his advanced age. Mansukh, the policeman, confirmed that she hadn't been accused of stealing, but of complicity to steal: she had apparently informed a gang of the hour at which her cousin normally left home. Once more Devi loudly pleaded her innocence.

Her father managed to track her down and begged the judges to let her out on bail. They agreed on one condition, that they would receive a large sum to do so. Devidin called his employers, two Thakurs, to the rescue. They agreed to lend him the money if in return, Devi would work in their homes to repay it. The deal was clinched. Devi was freed and duly followed her father's employers to their village.

Less than a week after her arrival they tried to rape her. She

struggled, but they knocked her out and only let her go twenty-four hours later. No sooner was she freed than she fled to Tyoga, back to Kailash.

She implored him to give her food and lodgings, but he spurned her. He had reunited with his wife, and had just had a second child. She begged even more on hearing this. Kailash, put her off, asking her to wait, while he contacted trustworthy friends. Sure enough, a few hours later, some men perched on an ox cart came to pick her up at the other end of the village. They were bandits; she realised that immediately. Nevertheless, she followed them. Just before nightfall, they reached a temporary campsite. Devi recognised Vikram there. He, in turn, acknowledged and welcomed her with a remark full of irony: 'So, you have come back to see me?'

Devi could hardly open her mouth, when Babu came out of his tent, and ordered them to feed her. She had hardly finished her meal when he instructed her to follow him to his tent. Devi obeyed without discussion and prepared to give in to all his demands without putting up a fight.

She escaped just before dawn. Apparently, she had no difficulty finding her way in the gorges: less than a week later, the police reported her to be back under her parents' roof in Sheikhpur Gura. The report adds that the court had postponed judgment on her case until the end of the rainy season.

The monsoon is a good season for robbery and violence, even if the storms, by shifting the land, causes the shape of the territory to change each week, sometimes even from one day to the next. During this period, the police are like everyone else, slow and vacuous, eager to forget the heatwave that has charred the Valley.

That is why the Harijan, Nathu, who worked for the honourable Krishna, the oldest member of Sheikhpur Gura, was the only one to overhear with impunity, the conversation of the group of bandits hiding out in the temple of the ancient ford. Despite a violent downpour, Nathu had descended at dawn to the banks of the river to wash the clothes, which his master soiled each night during his sleep.

The bandits arrived in small boats. The water had begun to rise, and they had been obliged to anchor them at the last section of the steps leading to the sanctuary, at the tip of a headland of pink sandstone. They gathered in a half circle in the only space that had not yet been invaded by water, a gallery running parallel with tiny niches scooped out in which the mouldy figures of the Goddess and Ganesh reigned. Obviously, they had just eaten, as they looked satiated.

Even though Nathu kept his distance, when the bandits raised their voices, and the wind carried their words, he did what any human being would have: he listened.

'We will have to cut off her nose' one of the men who was probably the leader pounded out. He was a determined looking, enormous character with a long moustache. From this sentence alone, Nathu understood that they must be talking about a woman, a fickle wife, or an unfaithful girl. This punishment was hardly ever meted out in the Valley now; but once in a way, one of these unfortunates could still cross your path, with a face mutilated ten or twenty years ago by the knife of a vengeful lover or a cuckolded husband.

A small skinny fellow, new perhaps, with nervous movements and crazed eyes, repeated in a shrill voice, as if to persuade himself that it was the right decision: 'Yes, we can keep her, and cut her nose off. After all, who is this Devi...'

Nathu calmly finished his washing. From other snatches of the conversation he had gathered that the sentence was planned for the following night. With his usual nondescript, indecisive step he left. As soon as he was out of sight of the temple he started to run; he ran like the wind to the house of Devi's parents to warn them about what was being plotted against her.

To begin with, Devi didn't believe him. She thought it was a trap because Nathu was Krishna's servant, and Krishna was the main witness in the charges brought against her. It was her mother, Moola, who was afraid. Nathu hadn't reached the end of his story when she exclaimed: 'If the bandits come here to cut off my daughter's nose they will rob us for good measure, and take away my only son.' And without delay she insisted that

Devi go down to the police station in Kalpi to warn them. Devi said that she would, on one condition: that they both went together.

Fortunately, the storm abated for a while, and it took them less than three hours to reach the police station. The only person there was the policeman Mansukh—the one who had tried to rape Devi at the time of her arrest. Moola spoke first, but she was awkward, became bogged down in her explanations. Devi interrupted her. She explained in a clear, loud voice, as she had when defending her father's case, what Nathu had both seen and heard that same morning. She repeated the threats given to her and requested aid and protection for herself and her family.

Mansukh gave no answer. He fiddled around and finally calmly declared: 'Don't worry. Tonight I am going to send a patrol to your village.' And as if to reassure himself that their minds were at ease as they left, he added one last thing which really did soothe them: 'We will take out the jeeps.'

## *16*

They got back to the village as the sun was setting. The storm had started up again, and they arrived soaking wet. Before drying themselves they had to round up the cattle who were wandering around the sidestreets. Then night fell on the earthen walls.

Devi heard it hailing on the cliff tops; she thought it was the sound of an engine. She got up and ran to the door, unlocked the bolt and stared into the darkness. There was nothing; nothing but rivers of mud into which the village, the fields and the ravines slowly dissolved.

Devi, continued to keep a lone vigil, listening attentively in the darkness. Like everyone else during the monsoon, her parents, the children, the cattle tied around them, slumbered. It was the evil hour of the night, the divided hour during which life and death meet, in which darkness is even darker still, obscurity still more obscure, the hour when carnivorous demons

infiltrate the thresholds, the chosen moment of the Nagarajas, Serpent Kings to leave their underground palaces and visit the hovels of mankind. It is the fatal interval when the subtler gods offer a glimpse of the other side—the full extent of our faults, the abyss of what shall never be again. The hour of strong wills, desires come from afar; where Time strengthens its perseverance to destroy the universe; where the truth is a mere shadow, misery a simple suspicion; where, looking into the depths of your soul, you can only see a great, black lake.

It was at that hour, Nathu came and knocked on Devidin Mallah's door. He knocked four or five times, little taps that were so reticent, so terrified, that Devi knew straightaway that it was him. She ran to the door and just had time to hear him whisper: 'Run Devi, run, they are here...' Almost immediately, someone started to pound on the door. Devi escaped into the kitchen and hid under an old jute sack.

The divided hour had come to an end; the night had taken sides, but not her side. Destiny followed its course, like the rainfall: there was nothing to be done; and even less to say.

First of all, as was to be expected, the door quickly collapsed. 'Devi,' one of the men shouted. She lifted up a corner of the jute sack. A torchlight swept over the ground. She made out the shadows of four men in police uniforms. 'Devi' they repeated. 'We have come to get you.' It was an unfamiliar voice, shrill.

Devi pulled the worn tarpaulin over her head, and curled up as best she could. It wasn't fear but the power of despair, the absurd will to oppose an obstacle to destiny.

She was really afraid, Devi, afraid as she had never been in her whole life. The more she tried to convince herself that the police were there, the deeper she burrowed under the tarpaulin. Because she knew exactly what was going to happen in the minutes that followed; she knew what was going to be said, and she was helpless in the face of it.

Everything happened just as she had predicted. In the next room her brother woke up. He rubbed his eyes, got up, and as the bright circle of torches was directed at him, he let out an interminable scream.

'It's the brother!' the man with the shrill voice shouted. 'We will take him instead!'

'Leave him alone,' Devi roared immediately. 'I'm coming. Leave him alone...'

In one motion she threw off the sack and ran as if to drown herself in the pool of light. She was so dazzled that she couldn't distinguish the faces of the intruders. She could only make out their uniforms with the metal badges and their polished buttons that shone in the dark.

Her brother backed away towards his bed. In the corner of the room, the human mass that represented the family recovered its form. Under the covers, nothing moved, no other breath was heard apart from the irregular rasping of animals disturbed in their sleep. Devi began to tremble. She tried to straighten her sari on her shoulder. But she had no more strength left, it fell back again, revealing her blouse. A man chuckled. She didn't have time to pull herself together: she was seized by the shoulders and thrown outside.

Then she was pushed towards the path which led down to the river. The ground was constantly shifting, caving in; her ankles gave way under her. At the slightest lapse, the grip of the two men tightened on her forearms. She no longer knew whether to be grateful for it or to curse.

Soon after, the ground stopped giving way under her feet, and when instead of the mud she felt the soft, rain-soaked sand and the lapping of small boats, she knew that she was near the river. Simultaneously, about ten men emerged out of the darkness. They too brandished torches, and on seeing her began to laugh. Their beams shone in every direction, from the cliffs back to the sides of the boats; then once more they pointed at her and at the men who held her prisoner.

The one who squeezed her right arm, as she had begun to realise, was the fat Babu. To her surprise, on her left she recognised Vikram. Neither one looked at her. Vikram grabbed a torch, Babu followed suit. The little thin man with the cutting voice, who continued to flit around in Babu's shadow, finally broke the silence:

'So, are we going to cut her nose off?'

Vikram stepped in immediately:

'It would be better to wait.'

He sounded lifeless, his lamplight trembled; Devi had also noticed that the grasp on her wrist had loosened. Babu guffawed, released Devi, and slowly ran the light over her body, amused by the fact that he was dazzling her.

'Good idea,' he muttered. 'Tonight I am in the mood for a woman. As for her nose, we will see later on.'

With this he pushed her into one of the boats, striking her again on the nape of her neck.

Although the action was violent—or maybe for that very reason, because it overstepped the limits and made the whole situation so unequal—Devi forced herself to lift her head this time. She turned around, shook her sari drenched from the rain and the water, and looking directly at him, retorted as she jumped into the boat:

'Don't waste your energy. If I am coming, it's because I want to.'

## *17*

They crossed the river. Heavy showers had started up again. On her forehead, on her back, the raindrops mingled with perspiration—the sweat of the monsoon, the rain of fear.

Without being consulted, Devi had been put in the centre of the boat, flanked by Babu and Vikram. With each straining action, with the least whirlpool, she was thrown against them, by turn. Either she felt the thick skin of Babu, his heavy, rough muscles, or else Vikram's lanky body, nervous, light, that evoked a certain birdlike quality; in any case, an animal that was ephemeral and quivering, which has always understood that life is transient. Devi already knew everything about Babu. Of Vikram she knew very little, apart from his gloomy, misty look, slow to leave hers and the burst of irony that occasionally

brightened him up with a brief, hard glimmer. For the moment, he worried her more than Babu.

They took their time. At one stage she was convinced they were going to drown her. Then she discovered that Vikram and Babu were just as impatient as she was to arrive at their destination; above all Babu, who hounded the oarsmen more insistently and threatened to capsize the boat each time he leaned over to follow the torchbeams.

In their milky light, the tempered cliffs sprang into view, half absorbed by the drizzle. They had reached the other side of the river, where the fertile Thakur plains began, near an enormous labyrinth of marshes.

The rifle butt dug into her back. She was pushed forward. One by one, the gangsters jumped onto the sand. She did the same, with Vikram and Babu close on her heels. Devi resumed her role as prisoner, captured by a human hoop net. safer than the strongest chains.

Beyond the fact that she had crossed the river and was on the outskirts of Thakur country, she didn't have the slightest idea where she was.

Vikram and Babu continued to flank her as closely as before. Between the two men silence now reigned. As the night began to fade and the sky cleared above the ravines, Devi watched their faces closely: both were equally impassive, not revealing any passion, except perhaps at the level of the jaw where the same small muscular knot contracted now and again, like the pulse of an unspoken anger.

They now reached the middle of two cesspools, where miniscule terraces suggested a suitable halting place. The men took out tarpaulins and stoves from their packs and set about putting up their tents.

Devi remembers how red everything was in this narrow pass. The red stone of the wall, the red of the water that streamed from the most diminutive gap in the rocks; the spongy earth that had adopted the copper reflections of the oblique rays of the rising sun. Still in silence, Vikram and Babu stayed close to their prisoner. They pretended not to be actually surveilling her

and watched the tents being erected. Apart from a few hurried looks that they gave her now and again, no one bothered with her at all.

No one, that is, except the small thin man, the one who had continually flitted around behind Babu the previous night when they had brought her to the boats.

'So Babuji, what about her nose? Her nose, will we look after her nose?'

Babu said nothing. He persisted in staring at the men, as Vikram did, who were unfolding their tarpaulins. The small, thin man wasn't put off, he started up again in a whining voice, pulling at the corners of his uniform:

'Babuji, we said...'

'We said nothing,' Vikram interceded. 'I will decide what we will do with the girl.'

'Really? '

This time it was Babu who spoke. All the men raised their heads, put aside their water cans and their tarpaulins. He sounded casual, as though the discussion already bored him. Vikram stuck to his guns:

'That girl is mine. Her cousin gave me ten thousand rupees to kill her.'

Babu yawned lazily. Then he spat into the mud and turned his back on him.

'Stop boring us with this whore's cousin.'

'So are you going to kill her?' The thin man kept on. Vikram repeated:

'That girl is mine. I will do what I want with her.'

Babu who was preparing to drink some tea, had been biding his time since the beginning of the discussion. He now stood up hastily, threw down his tumbler and turned around.

'And what is it you want to do? Kill her? Lay her?'

'I have complete control over her. Without me you would never have known where she lived. Without me, no one would have found her again...'

'When we decided to go up there, you intended to cut her nose off, didn't you?'

And he strolled towards Vikram. He made his way through the mud with calculated footsteps, gently lifting up his machine-gun. Vikram grabbed Devi's arm, placing her as a shield between Babu and himself:

'She is mine,' he reiterated. 'I am the one who should kill her. I was paid.'

One by one, the men dropped their water cans and their braziers and in turn advanced, finger on the trigger of their guns with the same movement as Babu, conjuring up the flexible step of a foraging tiger. Babu's smile grew wider; he swaggered, inordinately proud of the unspoken influence he had on his men.

He took one more step towards Devi. Vikram was holding her so firmly that she had trouble breathing. Babu circled them for a moment. With an appraising eye, he examined Devi from head to foot, ignoring Vikram. Then out of the blue, he became tired of this bizarre dance. He stood right in front of her and with a sudden yet effortless gesture, ripped her out of Vikram's grasp. Vikram gave in, as though crushed by an invisible power.

He did as the others. The gang instinct renewed its hold over him and he melted into the pack.

For once Devi looked alarmed. Babu had surprised her: he gave a little chuckle, a halting giggle that gave expression to all his anger as well as his pleasure at winning this round. Then he pinched her arm and her breasts several times. As she continued to stifle her screams, he squealed to Vikram:

'I have been familiar with this girl's backside for a long time now! And I had her for nothing!'

He continued to pinch her. Once again she gritted her teeth. So he threw her into the mud.

Within seconds he had separated her thighs and penetrated her, smothering her cries. She neither had the time nor the energy to put up a struggle. All she could do was drape a piece of her saree veil over her eyes, while the skinny little man jumped from one side of the muddy puddle to the other, exclaiming shrilly—whether in victory or in disgust, it was hard to say.

## 18

When she speaks of suffering, Devi never pronounces the actual word. She doesn't say pain either. Nor sadness or chagrin. It is not because she doesn't know these words. But having experienced misery first hand, Devi makes things uncomplicated, demystifies them. She says that there are days of the sky and the sun where everything radiates joy, even the wrinkles on old men's faces, or the dust on the roads; other days are of mud.

When she says the word 'mud,' Devi knows what she is talking about. The seven days following her abduction were spent in the red slime of Thakur country. For seven nights she walked in the quagmire, seven nights of sliding and wading. The bandits only stopped when morning broke to doze a few hours in the recesses of the cliffs. Both their clothes and their tents had absorbed the colour of the earth; and when they flung themselves down underneath their tarpaulins, it was as if they were trying to melt into the clay.

A few men lit a fire, then positioned themselves in front of the tents to stand guard. Babu shoved Devi under the canvas, tied her up and attached her wrist to his. They fell asleep instantly, united in the same exhaustion. When it was time to change the guard, they came and woke her, untying her bonds. This meant that she had to make tea and rice for the gang and try to wash herself; and when the troops had eaten, she had to suffer once again Babu's assaults, surrounded by the men.

But there were no hard and fast rules. Within the space of a few hours, Babu could scorn her, amuse himself by leading her to believe that he was no longer interested in her, that she could, if she so wished, disappear into the gorges, and run headlong into lonely death.

Babu particularly enjoyed humiliating her when she had just washed herself, when she had just found in the hollow of a fissure what passed as a spring, an unclear, thin trickle of water,—nothing was clear in the slime of the gorges—one that wasn't thick with sludge. Twice, she was lucky to find such a stream but, each time, Babu's aggressiveness increased as if it were

intolerable for him to see her rid herself of the debris in which the gang was trapped. He simply had to drag her down as soon as he could on these occasions.

One day, after such a game, he collapsed under his tarpaulin without binding her for once, or tying her to his wrist. The small, thin man who still hopped around him noticed this, but he too was exhausted, because he simply pushed Devi under his leader's tent, nestled at his feet under a plastic cover, and also fell asleep. As daylight dwindled, it started to rain again, short bursts of rain that quickly wore their fury out. Devi succumbed to their capricious pitter-patter, but couldn't sleep. It was no longer fear, or even shame. At this point in time she had passed into another world, where the boundaries of ordinary feelings disappear, where you become your own executioner, worse than any other—like the simple rushing of blood to the temples, for example, causing unlimited waves of anguish in the darkness of the night.

She thought about the events that had brought her there again and again, and in particular the night of her kidnapping. Beyond the nightmare, she could still see Vikram's eye, hard and mocking. For the past few days he hadn't come near her. She had only seen him from behind and at a distance, giving her the impression that he had renounced his hold on her; as if he didn't quite trust her.

She thought up a few ways of escaping; however, she still didn't have the slightest idea of where the bandits had brought her to.

Devi thought once more of the threat he muttered every day when the brigands untied her so that she could prepare a meal for the gang: 'If you run away, I will go and kill your brother.' But still, she could not ward off the feeling of hope; and if she didn't sleep that night, it was because she was on the lookout. She wasn't really waiting for anything in particular; it was more like the wild hope of a trapped creature.

It was in this frame of mind that she overheard whispering from the neighbouring tent. In the beginning it was merely a slight hum, a thin murmur penetrating the darkness. Soon came the sound of bodies changing position, tarpaulins being pushed back, and renewed whispering.

The men were talking about the river, about a shelter that was waiting for them in the grotto of a temple. They had enough of wading through mud and wanted to reach there soon. They also brought up the subject of two strangers, the Singh brothers, who were in prison; and of a woman, a certain Kusumana, who they jeered because they had driven her away the day she had expressed her desire to stay with the gang and carry a gun. Lastly, they spoke about her, Devi.

She isn't be really sure that it was Vikram who first mentioned her name. On the other hand, she is certain that it was him who spoke about the bandits' traditions regarding women. According to her, it was also Vikram who reminded the others of the story of Amrit Lal, the leader of one of the most vicious gangs in the history of the ravines, and who was, in spite of this, murdered in his sleep by his own men like an old jackal, for having tortured the women that he had kidnapped.

Vikram's friends already knew the anecdote well, because they quickly interrupted him with words of approval. 'It is the law of the baghis, they insisted nonetheless. We can kidnap women, insult them—we know their worth, not more than that of old shoes, soles or even the filth underneath them—but we must never torture them. It is the tradition, it is our honour. Else we must kill them. That one, Devi, she is a hard nut. Tough, too tough. Her cousin warned me. We should have killed her before starting out.'

He was no longer taking the precaution to speak in hushed tones, an omission badly received by the others, who answered in brief whispers. Then they stopped talking. In the stillness, a course of action had been decided upon; and, it was quite clear that they'd plotted against Babu.

## *19*

As Babu had promised, the trek was particularly tiring. The rain resembled demoniac waterfalls, which gouged large brown arteries out of the earth in which scree and mud were washed

along. They climbed constantly, only to descend as quickly, hedging between the ridges and the bottom of the gorges, threatened by the sudden rise of the springs. Both Vikram and Babu flanked Devi as they had done the first evening. Whether they were protecting her from each other, or each planning her downfall, she didn't want to know. She was satisfied to walk at an equal distance from both of them, constantly on the lookout, as indeed they were, for landslides: blotchy streaks giving way to a ledge about to collapse, a sudden fissure in the hollow of a quagmire, forecasting imminent flooding. They had to either climb back up or descend there and then, with agile steps as if to forget the leaden earth.

About one hour after daybreak, they crossed a transverse valley with even darker cliffs, where the alluvium of the higher slopes appeared to be concentrated. The rockfaces were sheer and it was impossible to avoid the cesspool, as they usually did, by taking shelter on the crest line. Sometimes the mess was rent with slow ripples, sucking and greedy, like an invisible mouth ready to gobble. Just as they felt convinced that they would never find a way out, a scout pointed to a fault in the centre of the peaks, behind a rock. In the increasing daylight, they could make out a sandy slope,. greenery and a corner of shimmering water. They had arrived at the river.

On one of these sands lay the hide-out which Babu's men had spoken of the day before, less than an hour's trek away, at the end of a path that twisted and turned between shrubs whose leaves had recently turned green again, and were glistening with drops of rain. Soon the path followed a bend, and began to sharply descend, broadening into a very well sheltered bay which the rising waters had not entirely covered. A devi temple was hollowed out on the side of the cliff. In the bluish haze of this calm morning, a freakish light appeared, ethereal. Everything appeared to invite them to stay over in this small bay, for respite and rest: the trees with their new leaves varnished with fresh sap, the sand of the banks, the strong sun which dispelled the humidity; the shelter of the temple, more than anything else, a real roof of stone, man made, close-fitting and properly squared off.

Babu and Vikram slowed down, also impressed by the charm of the place. Devi couldn't resist: she threw herself into the water.

It had been a gesture of pure desire, without either a moment's hesitation, or any ulterior motive. Fearless, but equally without courage: she was dirty as she had never been before, and the river was there, clear and tepid, a blessing from nature, a promise from the gods. She clenched her teeth and plunged right in. She stayed underwater a few seconds, vigorously rubbing her legs and her stomach. Closing her eyes, she withdrew into her own world, thinking of nothing at all and in particular not of Babu or of what was going to follow.

He dragged her onto the parvis of the temple, undressed her, riddled her with punches and kicks. Then, as always, he threw her down on the ground.

But the bath had perked her up, she struggled this time and lashed out, striking him with her knee between the thighs. He began to yelp. For a second she thought that he was going to crumple onto the marble. Just then, Vikram spoke.

He was calmly leaning against one of the pillars of the temple: he had the same look on his face, mocking and brutish.

'You may as well kill her,' he snapped. She is a tough one, she is; it isn't Kusumana we are dealing with. You will see, now that we are out of the gorges, she is going to go running to the police. She is going to turn us in. We are all going to find ourselves behind bars, like the Singh brothers...'

Babu stood stock still for a while, as if he didn't know which of the two to aim his anger at, Vikram who scorned him from behind his pillar, or this half-naked girl, flung to the ground, who had dared to strike him.

Just then, a burst of gunfire, was heard followed by five or six others. It reverberated off the walls which circled the river; the roar seemed to go on forever. Babu's body slumped onto the stairs of the temple, then two other bandits fell on top of it: one was the scout, the other the small, thin man, who had been hit in the head and whose blood

mingled with Babu's on the steps. They all died immediately.

Not one of the men moved. Vikram himself didn't dare budge. He stayed rooted to the spot, behind the pillar, his machine-gun still aimed at the three bodies. Devi was still on the ground; between her clothes and herself, lay the bodies riddled with bullets, and amidst a growing pool of blood.

Vikram came out from behind his pillar. He picked up her rags, and threw them at her silently. Then he turned to the gang and pointed to the three bodies:

'Clean that up for me!'

The bandits didn't respond. They stared, dazed, at the blood which continued to stream down the steps, at Babu's body and the gesture he was about to make before he was hit by gunfire, frozen. The left hand clenched a small necklet that he never let out of his sight, a silver link from which a grigri hung: a sort of worn pumice stone, speckled, run through with miniscule veins of jasper, a pebble that seemed to have already lived thousands of lives.

'Go on!' Vikram insisted.

And to set the example, he leaned over Babu's corpse, ripped off his amulet and threw it into the river. 'It is returning to where it came from, he bellowed, making his way towards Devi, while his cries reverberated along the entire length of the cliffs.

She picked herself up, and tried to drape her soaking sari over her. She looked at him without horror, but unsmilingly, standing before him like a fading wind.

He was caught unawares. He stared at her, then took off his jacket, moved closer to her and placed it on her shoulders:

'From now on, you belong to me.'

He had spoken solemnly, slightly raising his voice, as though delivering a statement to the gang—or maybe to persuade himself of his own authority. But he had hardly finished his sentence when Devi crushed him with one word:

'Tell me then, how a piece of property can say no!'

## 20

It is certain, that they didn't fall into each others' arms. Rather they spent several days giving each other the cold shoulder. Devi's response had left Vikram speechless. When the immediate shock passed, he grabbed a pair of trousers out of his backpack, threw them to her and ordered her to go and dress herself in the galleries underground. She carried this out unwillingly, claiming that she had to take another dip because of the blood that had spattered her. The truth was, not one drop had reached her. Vikram didn't have time to either argue or raise his voice: without waiting for an answer, she rushed towards the river.

And she took her time. On the cliffs around the cove, she had discovered aromatic herbs with which she perfumed her armpits and her genitals, just as she had done in the days of her wild adolescence; she also found a seam of fine clay which she smeared all over her hair. Vikram finally lost his patience with her and went to bring her back. She had only just finished rinsing herself, but he lifted her out of the water without discussion, on the pretext that she had to help the gang to burn Babu's body as well as those of his accomplices—his cousins, he told her, recruited three months earlier to replace the Singh brothers who had been caught by the police.

The cremation was not an easy task. It took them a good hour to gather enough wood from the miserable line of shrubs that fringed the cliffs. But it was still humid; it spit and gave out an acrid smoke that caused a stabbing pain in the chest. It was as though Babu, though he looked like an old goatskin lost in the middle of the branches, still had the power to push back the flames and impose his demoniac strength upon his men. After a while, Vikram could take no more. He snatched up a can of kerosene which was normally used to light the stoves, and threw it onto the firewood.

Gigantic blue and green flames took hold straight away; Devi was filled with horror and turned towards Vikram, whispering: 'That is no way to burn the dead.'

'I have no choice', he answered sharply, before dragging her onto the path that led to the temple.

He saw her face darkening, and thought it wise to explain things to her. He couldn't force upon his men the ordeal of returning through the gorges with three corpes secured to their backpacks. In any case, they were too far now from Babu's country to bring his dead body back to his family, as was the custom even for enemies. To summon a priest from a nearby village who could have burnt the bodies according to the rites with mantras, real logs, incense and garlands of flowers was also risky. 'Treason was rampant in the gorges,' he said. In conclusion he added 'You will have to get used to it.'

After a while she appeared to be more lighthearted, and dangled her legs like a child waiting its turn to play. She then asked him:

'What scares you, Vikram Mallah?'

'A bandit is never scared of anything.'

He had answered dryly, saying the first thing that came into his head. She could have laughed, shrugged her shoulders like she had done earlier, with a disdainful little air. But she did nothing. She pretended not to have heard him, then continued, pointing to the cliff where they had set up the pyre and from where the odours of kerosene rose like a sacrilegious stench:

'You are not even afraid of the ghost of your leader?'

'I didn't have any choice, I have already told you that.'

'With the funeral that you offered him, he would never get into the City of Yama.'

'What is it to you?'

He lifted his head in the direction of the river, a faraway look in his eyes as he gazed over at the opposite bank, where the waters were becoming leaden, like the sky; then he muttered:

'I hope it rains.'

'Why?'

'The smoke. We mustn't be seen from the other river bank.

'The other bank is my home.'

She had picked another leaf off a branch and started to chew it while observing the river. But she wasn't looking at it vaguely.

Far from it. A calculation had sharpened her sight. Vikram caught her off-guard; he must have been worried about her, because he said tentatively:

'Do you want to run away?'

Her jaws clenched even tighter; green juice spurted from the corner of her mouth. She licked it away with the end of her tongue. Vikram was right beside her, he could smell the acid freshness that the sap gave to her mouth. He sat down on the first step of the stairs, and waved his arm in the direction of the gorges:

'If you really want to clear off into that, my poor girl...'

'You were paid to kill me, yes or no?'

He stood up without saying a word. She persisted:

'My cousin paid you, didn't he? Did you receive some money?'

'What difference does it make to you now?'

'And how much did he give you, my cousin? Tell me: how much did he give you?'

She jumped down off the parapet, ran quickly down the stairs and right up to where he was sitting. Her almond eyes narrowed, making her look like a cat about to attack. He turned his back to her:

'If you know it was your cousin who paid me, then you'd also know how much he gave me.

'Maybe, I didn't quite understand!'

Then she added, half seriously, half jokingly as she often did:

'So, am I worth these ten thousand rupees?'

Vikram smiled. She stood facing him and took him by the arm:

'Go on then Vikram Mallah. We are alone. I have no gun. Go on, you can do it! Shoot me, keep your promise!'

The sky was getting heavier by the second. Vikram looked up.

'It's going to rain,' he continued. 'Just as well.'

He walked away without a glance backwards. As she didn't move and her mouth hung open with words that didn't come, he added as he walked back up the stairway:

'You have a lot to learn, Devi, before you deserve to be eliminated. First of all, you must get some sleep. We are protected here. Peaceful and protected.'

Not another word was said. He didn't turn around even once. But she followed him all the same.

## 21

For once, she waited for him, this man she longed for. Three days and three nights, in the galleries of the temple. To begin with, it wasn't too difficult. She was extremely tired and slept a great deal; she also had a lot to try to forget.

When she woke up, she was still astonished to discover that she was free, rid of Babu's enormous, bulky body; however, he resurfaced constantly in her dreams, his fist lifted against her, his face consumed with hatred. 'They weren't really nightmares; merely fleeting incidents, like flashes of living memory that came to destroy the lassitude of her nights. Outside, the monsoon was in full stride. It rained unceasingly; raging showers, sometimes shot through by lightening. Their uninterrupted pattering, together with the humidity of the air and exhaustion, resulted in total lethargy.

On the third morning, Vikram decided that his men had sufficiently recuperated to move on to another camp. It was also the day he finally decided to approach her. She was trying to hitch up the bottoms of her trousers as best as she could. She felt someone taking her by the shoulders. A movement devoid of any callousness, just a light pressing of the palms, like a gesture that had been agreed on a long time ago. She knew there and then that it was him.

She didn't dare move, or answer, but when she heard him whisper repeatedly, his voice trailing off: 'Come, come,' she stood up straightaway.

He brought her into a corner of the gallery at the back of the temple. A green light filtered through, like a mouthful of the same green sap of young shoots revived by the rains. The

ground was humid, with slabs of stone that were slightly mildewed. They lay down on them all the same. They were carried away by the moment and the occasion, they became lovers in silence, joyfully. Their respective passions sought each other out and cried aloud, one's face reflected the other's, together with their desire to live. At last she was welcoming inside her a man she yearned for, and who yearned for her, without forcing her; his intensity matched hers, found its soul partner. He was the one she preferred, a preference that was recognised and permitted in the sphere of sombre freedom that was the bandits world. Because she also knew, as she curved her back as he had asked her to, or she tautened her stomach as he wished, that she was signing a pact against which there could be no possible revolt: to obey him whatever the order, to follow him wherever he went in the madness of the ravines. Even at the risk of finding herself abandoned one day; to have nothing before her but a void.

Everything that came from Vikram had the same worth, blows or caresses, wounds or pampering—they were all equally pleasurable. The hours that followed were peacefully banal: she ate by his side, laughed in unison with him, spoke to him, breathed with him. And learnt about him.

Just as the gang were about to leave the temple of the cove, Vikram asked her: 'Are you sure you are able enough for this? We are in a hurry, you know...' She answered without any trace of insolence: 'You will see, and she took her place by his side when the file started to move off.'

Vikram had decided to head for the Etawah ravines upstream, where he was sure he could contact his informers again and find provisions. For fear of being seen by the police—since the Singh brothers were captured, the gang dreaded, more than anything else, being followed by their helicopters—, he had chosen a track between the ravines and the river, sheltered by a border of shrubs. Here the earth was not so fragmented; if it were not for the showers and backpacks, the walk could have resembled a picnic.

To prepare for the kidnappings was Vikram's plan for the

weeks to come. They would have to wait until the gang was ready, he said, their arms cleaned and restored, provisions restocked, and a network of informers reestablished; he added that they wouldn't reach their destination before the middle of August, or before end of the rains.

He informed Devi of his plans in bits and pieces, haphazardly, on the road, if he happened to feel like it, and always in a low voice. Not that he hid anything from his men; but as soon as they had left the temple he had warned that no one was to speak while they were walking, and he was determined to set an example himself. However, from time to time, he couldn't help saying one sentence, then another one, his nose lifted to the sky, inhaling the wind. as he always did when he spoke of important matters. When they arrived at the spot where the camp was—the ruins of a small Moghul mausoleum, its archway practically caving in—he suddenly became more expressive, with an urgency to do something at once.

On that day, a few hours after having taken her as his mistress, Vikram Mallah admitted that his business was not murder, but kidnapping. Quick money; few risks, not much effort, apart from the moment when they bargained over the hostages. He claimed that that was the best part of it, the endless discussion with the families. He could talk for weeks on end. As for Babu, he had never been able to do that. He became irritated, and always ended up by hitting out blindly. That's why, the evening they had come to kidnap her, it had been Vikram that had taken charge. He had to twist Babu's arm, which is how the bitterness had taken root, and led to their row and his downfall. But now that he was dead, the gang would only indulge in abduction. The Singh brothers as well as Babu were nothing other than hooligans; they were not real bandits, but rogues who liked blood so much that they had been nicknamed 'The Valley Butchers.'

'Blood,' Vikram concluded, 'is necessary when you are threatened or you need to take revenge. But to eat, for everyday life... The gang is going to continue in accordance with my ideas. We simply have to see how we are going to share the

work. Each one must have a position and a rank.'

She felt her neck, then her back flexing, and then her hand cooking something to give Vikram strength. But suddenly out of the blue, from the depths of her being, another desire emerged, the one that had always brought her back to her senses, always pushed her to rove the pathways. She heard herself saying to him—calling more than speaking, something that resembled a scream:

'Before you go, tell me all the same, Vikram Mallah, what is my place in your gang!'

He swung around immediately, and stared at her with the look he wore when measuring his enemies from head to foot, a look spiked with mockery:

'And you Devi, tell me what your strength is... Is that all you know of, your strength?'

He was smiling, but she sensed that his composure was put on, because he kept fiddling with a small stone that he wore around his neck, a strange object speckled in one place, sharpened in another, the whole lined with miniscule bands, a long pattern of gold specks sunk into a blackish sediment, like some filth accumulated over centuries. It looked astonishingly like the one that he had ripped off Babu's neck and had thrown in the river, cursing it at length. Vikram also had a particular way of touching it: he brushed it with the tips of his fingers, touched it briefly, then pushed it away abruptly like a detonator, or an giving off object sudden heat; despite this, he constantly came back to it.

'Strength,' he continued. 'Do you think you have any? Strength of good and evil...'

'You told me that you would be satisfied to just kidnap the people. I could...'

He interrupted her right away:

'You have chosen the wrong kind of strength, Devi. There is also the strength to remain silent. The strength not to kill when you wai t to, or to kill when you do not want to.'

'You don't think that I, when Babu, ...'

'You, you...'

He didn't let her finish,; he avoided her gaze. Then he lightly touched his amulet one last time:

'Do you want one of these?'

He caught her offguard, his voice softening unexpectedly; with this stone that shone when he moved it into the light. She stretched out her hand to stroke it:

'It would be nice if we had the same one.'

He unceremoniously pushed her away with a reflex movement; then retorted in the same abrupt way:

'You have to earn it.'

He took another look at the sky through the crumbling archway; then he said in a low voice, while taking some new leaves of charas from his pocket:

'I don't have enough time to teach you. Unless...unless the rains return with the wind.'

## *22*

The wind did choose to bring the rains, and the gang was obliged to prolong their halts.

However, they were never too far from the fields, long strips of slimy earth boxed in by the cliffs, out of which sprang the wealth of the Thakurs. Once the rain eased off, Mallah workers would venture into them once more, resigned already to spending yet another year breaking their backs over land that wasn't theirs, nor ever would be.

It was there, in the middle of Thakur country, high up on a hill that overlooked the fields, that Vikram began to explain to her the trade of a bandit. That evening under a lilac tree swaying with birds, he told her that good and evil didn't have the same significance for the sons of baghis as it had for other men. Evil, was the treacherous form of justice invented by the police and townspeople, and all those who were sold to them. Good, was never to fall into their hands, to respect the law of the gang. Also, to sometimes take revenge.

When she heard the word revenge, Devi raised her head. So

Vikram added, 'Revenge is not the domain of women.'

She stiffened. He realised that he was on the wrong track, and continued by saying:

'It would be better if you forget everything, now that we are together.' He assured her that soon she would have other things to think about. Life would be very hard as part of the band, always pilfering, always running between the fields and the gorges; she would be constantly exhausted and threatened. He told her too, that she would become bigger and stronger. That the ravines had the power to strengthen souls and toughen bodies. But on one condition: that the rules were obeyed unfailingly.

Until nightfall, he listed the rules, as he would have recited a prayer. Never start trekking before listening to what the scouts have to say. Every time you light a fire outdoors, smother the smoke with a blanket so that you will not be noticed. On the footpaths, learn to recognise the smell of a panther, a deer, a jackal and a tiger. Distinguish between the serpents in the gorges and those who hide in the fields. The deadly reptile and the harmless one. Interpret the flight of birds, as it indicates a change in the wind's direction or the approach of men. Learn by heart, each day, the road taken, the springs, the hiding places, the burrows where ammunition is hidden. Accumulate a store of landmarks. Remain silent whenever possible. Leave the band as you approach a village. Don't sleep, eat or drink the Goddess' liquor unless the leader gives the order to do so. The rest of the time, yield and move.

That night, Vikram did not speak about the attacks. He merely said that with a little practice, it was possible to sniff the odour of a man who had passed through the gorges less than an hour before; and by combing the ravines, one recovered knowledge that existed since time began. 'You haven't finished learning,' he concluded. 'You are still weak and limp, like soft wax, you need a mould in which to harden; the Valley will serve as this mould, and in it you will realise your form.' He then announced that she would start out in the gang at the lowest level. She would continue to cook for the men; but between

meals and whenever they were not moving, even if she had to forego some sleep, she would maintain the firearms.

Vikram had asked her: she complied. Fortunately, it still rained a lot, the treks were short, the halts often lasted several days, and Vikram didn't appear to be in any hurry to move on to kidnapping. He took it upon himself to initiate her into weaponery during their long evenings together, in the shelter of the grottos and temples.

She learned very quickly. Fifteen days later, she knew almost everything there was to know about the Enfield, the Mauser 430 rifle, the Sten gun, the SLR and the ancient Henry Express, made of a steel that was so patinated that it was almost like a caress. To test her, Vikram chose to begin with the most difficult task, cleaning the machine-guns. He gave her Babu's first of all, which he said he was going to sell for buying a few walkie-talkies, in order to make kidnapping easier and more reliable. Then he handed over his own gun, which had a barrel decorated with a statuette of the Goddess, typical of all the arms of the gang. Apart from him, only two other men had automatic guns, Lukka, the eldest in the gang and his very young friend, Kalla.

It was a sight worth seeing, the solemnity with which Lukka and Kalla came to hand over their machine guns to Devi. They were still wary but trying to overcome this, since Vikram had ordered them. He stood right beside her, guiding her hand through the oil and the filth. The others followed on consecutive evenings.

Even those not high up enough yet to own anything other than a penknife or a simple cutlass, filed past her. They all sported thick moustaches, and had the same regard for burning pride. Their stories were all alike. They were the first to admit it. There was no way out of these incidents of revenge. It was as if, by recounting their own injustices—an attack on their wives, a father sent packing by a grasping landowner—they could make Devi forget the contempt with which they had treated her, and what she had represented for them when Babu was still the leader of the gang: merely female prey, tortured and humiliated like the rejects in the most sordid of brothels. Maybe they didn't want

to remember this either; maybe they had already expelled the image of her badly abused body from their memories. Now they came to her with a watchful and pensive look on their faces, as they would to a young brother or a child in the process of learning the trade. She wordlessly listened to them, her eyes downcast. These men had seen everything and knew all of her humiliation: how could she hold their gaze? Dressed as a man, she no longer had to pull her sari veil over her face, or to seek refuge in the folds of it. Some evenings however, she plucked up the courage to take a look at them. That bandit with the split lip and the very long moustache, was he the one who had played the accordion when the men had started to sing the night Kailash brought her to the Hanuman temple? And that one over there, thin and worried looking, who hadn't stopped eyeing his Mauser since she had started cleaning it, was he the gangster who collapsed right in the middle of the party that evening, knocked out by a flask of alcohol that he had gulped in one go?

Her recollections became muddled, faint, as though they emanated from another life. Besides, Vikram had warned her that men had died since then and others had joined the gang, beginning at the lowest level as she had, and were happy all the same to carry out the most menial tasks as porters or scouts. Nevertheless, they came to talk to her, as the rest of the gang did. For them too, she was the leader's wife, even if she had been allotted the most despicable of all jobs.

Devi once said and she repeated it: what she liked about the band was that she had found her niche in life. In the most powerful expressions, as well as in the most humble—little Kok, for example, a young Harijan who had been there for only two months and still only had a miniscule penknife which he asked her to polish—she understood that she finally had social standing, and that she would no longer be threatened. For the first time in her life, she wasn't alone—but neither was she in the way. That was what made her happier than she had ever been, at least if we are to believe the few significant, terse sentences, so typical of her way of speaking, with which she summed up the monsoon of 1979: 'The bandits kidnapped me. Through

them I met Babu, and I met Vikram. Babu tortured me, Vikram killed Babu and took me as his wife. There is a god who takes care of love, after all.'

## *23*

Then something started to change within the gang. It happened towards the middle of August, around the time of Nagapanchami when the peasants take out long processions and make offerings to appease the serpent's poisonous souls. To begin with, the rains became less frequent, lighter, a kind of drizzle that hardly penetrated anything. As a result, the treks in the gorges became longer; they started to camp outside on the perimeter of the fields, almost in view of the villages. One evening, when they had finished eating, strangers arrived from a narrow pass that lead to a heath.

Not one of the four guards keeping watch over the camp stopped them. They were three young villagers who appeared to be in high spirits, jeering and marvelling in anticipation of the idea of meeting bandits. They were accompanied by an older woman with a resolute bearing, who surveyed all around her with disdain. She was walking at the head of the group and was beautiful—Devi had noticed her straightaway—, a solemn beauty, unruffled, that experienced women often possessed in the Valley. At the same time she still had a lively, young step, and it was only the dry lines of her mouth and her heavy form under the drapes of her sari that gave away the fact that she had lived several lives already. Several men, perhaps; and certainly children.

'Kusumana,' Vikram mumbled, when he saw her coming towards the tents.

Devi caught him biting his lip, crinkling up his eyes as he did each time he was worried. From that moment, she was on the alert. This name, Kusumana, reminded her of something, of remarks she had heard the night the men had plotted against Babu. It must have brought back memories of Kailash, his first wife's scream, their return to Kanpur, when she had wanted to

chase her from the house: Everything now happened in quick succession. She grabbed Vikram's machine-gun, which was placed, as it was every night, on the tarpaulin that served as a tent. Before he could even chance to make the slightest move, she had swept down on the stranger, shouting:

'No women here!'

The other woman was dumbfounded, and took a step backwards; but as soon as she saw Devi's plait swinging around her hips, she immediately came to her senses and retorted as though she were spitting at her: 'And you, what do you think you are?'

She had a throaty voice, hoarse and powerful, which gave the impression, with each quaver, of expanding her chest and heavy breasts. As for her posture: it was that of a woman ready to meet the most savage enemies head-on or bear the worst kind of humiliations. Her smile was hard, with an ironic crease at the corner of her mouth, and her look of indifference was numbing. Devi was aware of all this, as Kusumana had taken advantage of the moment to stretch one arm out towards Devi's gun, and with the other, had attempted, to seize her braid.

She just managed to move. Devi instantaneously plunged the barrel of the machine gun into her chest. The other woman collapsed with a howl that was unsuccessfully muffled: before the three villagers who were escorting her had the opportunity to jump on Devi, Vikram arrived, tore the machine gun out of her hand and pointed it at Kusumana, repeating in a dull voice:

'Go away. I want no women here.'

The peasants remained rooted to the spot for a minute, one by one they looked at Vikram, then at Devi, and back to Vikram. As he continued to aim his gun at the woman, they decided to give up any attempt to understand. Vikram immediately brought them to the other end of the camp, and asked for them to be served something to eat.

Nobody watched the woman picking herself up, or taking the path back towards the narrow pass; no one besides Devi. She remarked that with her firm tread, her bold look lifted towards the setting rays of sun, the woman whose name she had

hated on hearing it uttered, who already lived in the gorges, was trying to find her place there. The same place as her own, she was sure, and that meant: Vikram.

However, if Devi hardly slept that night it wasn't because of jealousy. She had discovered an unfamiliar pleasure, akin to that achieved by alcohol. In any case, it coursed through her blood, creating the same thrill. It was the exhilaration of her first victory.

She wasn't given much time to savour it. Just after dawn, Vikram announced to the gang that the first attack under his command would take place two days later on the other side of the river, in two villages where he had just heard there was booty to be had, Deokali and Maheshpur.

'Maheshpur!' Devi exclaimed. 'It is my first husband's village.'

Until then she had never broken the order Vikram imposed on her, of silence in front of the men. To her amazement, he didn't reproach her. He merely answered, with his first smile since the previous evening: 'All the more reason.'

## 24

It was only to steal, Vikram had declared the day before the attack. He would see about the kidnappings later on. They had to first to build up a kitty in order to finance the purchase of arms, to buy silence from some and information from others, before the kidnappings. Then he explained how he intended to carry out the operation.

First of all they would cross the river just before sunrise. The boats had been lent to him by friends in a nearby village, peasants who had informed him that there were good pickings on the other side of the river. A few kilometres from there, in Kalpi, a big political rally was going to be held the very next day. The elections were imminent, almost all the men of Deokali and Maheshpur would be away from their homes. Only the infirm or the old would be left with the women and children. They would start by attacking Deokali, then they would move on to

Maheshpur. Easy work, even for beginners, Vikram reckoned. If there was a hitch, which was highly unlikely, the gang could always hide in a tunnel which was just below Deokali, in a crevasse of the cliffs. As an added precaution, they would check the place out before the attack. They would take advantage of this to verify the condition of some ammunition stored there by Babu six months earlier, following the arrest of the Singh brothers. As for the rest, the job would be purely routine. All they had to do, as usual, was to respect the rules.

All the men observed Vikram with a knowing air, including little Kok. There was a long silence, a moment of contemplation during which each one appeared to be transported in spirit to the other side of the river to the danger, the fear and the desire to vanquish; Vikram was no less preoccupied. When he spoke once again, to allot each of the men various tasks in preparation for the next day, it was in a muffled voice, already clouded with terror.

He didn't address Devi. One by one, the men went to bed. She watched them walk away without saying a word. Vikram continued to ignore her. As was often the case at sunset, he lit his pipe and took a few drags of charas. She was choking with rage, when she snapped: 'And me?'

He didn't lose his composure. He inhaled the smoke from the charas, and smiled at her; then he grabbed her roughly by the arm, so energetically that it took her by surprise. She heard him screech: 'Come over here, and listen carefully! If you are afraid, clear off. But don't let me see you again!'

He had drawn her to the other end of the camp, where the northern scout was posted. Their approach startled him. Vikram sat Devi down on the ground that was still wet. They spent nearly all night there, looking up at the stars. Vikram was the one who spoke for the most part. When Devi wasn't sure that she had really understood, she dared to ask a few questions. He answered them without even waiting for her to finish her sentences, in a grave tone of voice adopted by the old villagers when they told the children on feast days about the great legends of the gods. In everything that he explained, however, not much

was unfamiliar to her, and she had to stop him from time to time to tell him so. For example, when he told her that at this time of the year it was better for them to seek cover in the fissures of the ravines, to dodge the police when they came within sight of Deokali. Neither the millet nor the wheat was high enough to hide them.

She sighed in exasperation; a few minutes later she interrupted him again when he asked her to swear, as he had asked all the other members of the band, not to talk, if by some misfortune she was caught: 'Do you think that after all they have done to me that I would come clean with those snakes?'

'Don't call them snakes,' Vikram cut in, stroking his amulet. 'Maybe one day you will have the opportunity to get to know the Snake's Force, and realise the extent of it. Policemen, they are worms. Nothing more than maggots. Vermin is the only name that they deserve.' With this, he resumed listing his advice.

As a matter of fact, that night Vikram spoke to her above all about omens. At least that is the impression Devi had, because when she recalls this first attack, she talks constantly about them. She was flabbergasted when she realised that Vikram believed in foreboding. Until then, she had thought that bandits, along with everything else, had given up the law of omens by which the villagers could say when a tragedy occurred, that they saw it coming because a chicken hadn't eaten its grain or they had met a jackal on the left-hand side of the road. Much to her surprise, it applied to the bandits as much as it did to any other peasant; everything was a sign, on the footpaths and in the sky, a mysterious declaration from the masters of destiny; and the scouts and guards of the band were particularly knowledgeable in this arduous science. At night time, for example, they not only watched out, from the four corners of the camp, for shadows and the human noises, they also looked into the darkness for messages from the gods. More so the day before an attack. In this way, at a solitary squeal from a hare, or at the first screech of an owl, the raid was cancelled.

On this subject, Vikram was also well informed, a lot more, in any case, than the priests or the witches in the villages, and

he really enjoyed talking about it. He assured her that the next day, on their way to Deokali, if by any chance a wolf or a lynx crossed the gang's path on the right-hand side, the attack would be a great success. They could even expect a pile of gold, if a cock or a young partridge dared cry scream as they were crossing the river. On the other hand, if the scout informed them that a large, male antelope or a small deer had crossed the gang's track from left to right, they would immediately retrace their steps. 'If someone tripped up or dropped their gun, it meant the same thing; everything would stop. If a cow started to follow them, if they came across a woman with a pot which was full, that was a good sign. But if the pot was empty, or if they, met a leper, an oil merchant or a disabled person, then without hesitation, they would all split up, no questions asked. The worst of them all was, if a snake reared itself up before a scout. If that happened...'

He had started to stroke his amulet once again, to whisper a prayer, listening one last time for night sounds. Devi must have dozed off, for she doesn't remember the rest, apart from the fact that she went back to the tent leaning on his shoulder, and was awoken by Vikram shaking her.

Dawn had broken, with a grey fog. Devi hadn't slept enough. Moving about stiffly she prepared the tea. Vikram reproached her for this. It was true that all around her, the men were all ready to leave; more restless than the day before, but more lighthearted too. They drank down the tea that she had brewed in one gulp, and asked for more. Finally, she came to life, and risked facing Vikram, worrying once more about what she was supposed to do. 'We'll see when we have reached the other side,' Vikram retorted. He looked tense. Before leaving, instead of smoking charas as he had done every other day, he took out a metal wine flask, and quaffed a large glassful of alcohol. The flask was then passed around. Devi was the last to drink, and forced herself to do so.

So the trudge began. A track led down to the river, and the band descended it at a run. Four boats were waiting in a cove, before a miniscule temple, a devi shrine, made out of beautiful,

good quality stone for once, whitewashed and with moulding that had been freshly varnished with vermilion. The men stopped in front of it, passing around Vikram's flask once more. Before taking a drink, they poured a drop of the alcohol at the feet of the black statue. Then they murmured some ritual phrases, a sort of curse, that summoned war spirits and the forces of war. The words death and blood were repeated often. When it was her turn, Devi was only able to stammer it, but nobody noticed, as Vikram had already jumped into the first dinghy and was grumbling: 'Daylight is coming, we must hurry.' They got in. They squeezed themselves into the bottom of the hull with great difficulty, because of the rifles and machine-guns that hung over the sides. Only the oarsmen were less hunched up than the others, listening and watching out at the same time. Jaws were set, muscles hardened. From this point on, everything was a possible enemy: the police, the peasants, animals, the river. Maybe even the gods; but they would warn them.

They arrived at the cove below Deokali. The boats glided effortlessly in water that scarcely lapped their sides. It was very dark, the sun hadn't yet reached this side of the river. The fissure through which the boats had to pass had very steep rockfaces, and it was undoubtedly a difficult task to gain access by road. Before gaining the footpath that clung to the wall, they would probably have to climb a large mountain face. Devi wasn't sure that she could do it.

But suddenly Lukka produced a piece of rope from his backpack, and threw it with a lissome toss of his arm. On the first attempt, the loop at the end secured itself to an enormous reddish stone, at the very top of the rockface. To execute this with such perfection and precision, it almost seemed as if Lukka had, calculated and rehearsed this movement hundreds, maybe thousands of times. The cord fell back down to the foot of the cliff, its extremity submerged under the hull of the boats.

For some days now, the waters had been falling. A tiny corner of the sands emerged, cluttered with dead branches and rotting leaves. The dinghies ran aground one by one. They anchored them straight away to stones on the cliff. Vikram hopped out

onto the sand, cleared away the heap of branches and found the entrance to a narrow tunnel. It was more like a tube, in fact; it was impossible to stand upright, and it was not very long. It smelt of earth and mouldy wood. In a corner, at the furthest end, Vikram raised some stones, scratched the ground, tearing it apart by stabbing it with the butt of his gun. Then he rose, an expression of joy on his face. He threw several packets of bullets enveloped in plastic to his men. Once more, he bent over and started whipping up the earth, struggling, sweating. The twins, Badru and Balo came to his aid. Soon after, their fingers slid over a new layer of plastic. Vikram held up his latest discovery, a Mauser belonging to the Singh brothers, also hidden away by Babu, who had succeeded in taking it away from the police at the time of their arrest.

Then they set off, in an order that seems to have been decided beforehand, the more modest going first, little Kok, then Gabbar and Pana, with their brass-handled daggers, then Tunda, Mannu, and Charna who only possessed old rifles that had been made up in haste; in the dens of Kanpur. When there was only Vikram, Lukka and Kalla left in the cove, Devi thought that her lover wanted to leave her alone to guard the boats in the tunnel; but she had scarcely lifted her eyes towards him, to beg him to take her with him, when he placed the Mauser on her shoulder:

'I am lending it to you. We'll see if you understand what you have been told.'

## *25*

And so he explained to her what she would have to do. When Deokali was in view, all the men would scatter into the fields. They would surround the village, but be dispersed. They had to make sure that they arrived simultaneously behind the walls of the first houses. They would raid only when they heard his signal: a burst of machine-gun fired. Each bandit was to carry out the task he had been assigned the day before. Some of them

were to smash down the doors, others were to enter the houses through the lofts, and still others were to keep the few men present at bay, forcing the women or reticent old men to reveal where their jewellery and money were hidden. The rest of the group would be designated to keep watch.

Devi too had been given a job. When the signal to attack was given, she had to run straight to the village square where she would meet up with two other bandits. She was to fire three rounds of her Mauser into the air, to terrify the inhabitants. After that, no one was to move anymore. Just to keep watch and be quiet. If there was a rumpus, they would clear out.

He took her by the shoulders and pushed her towards the rope that was swinging against the cliff. She climbed as quickly as she could, trying to imitate the motions of those who had gone before her. To begin with, she had a lot of difficulty. To encourage her, Vikram had shouted: 'Go on, push; go on, won't you!' At last she got the hang of it. When she was within a hair's breadth of the end, he couldn't help laughing: 'My lovely little monkey!' Lukka and Kalla began to laugh too.

Vikram was the last to leave. Like the others, he climbed up the cliff in no time at all. Once up there, they spent a while catching their breath, giving the scouts a chance to patrol around Deokali and return to confirm that everything was in order.

Following the news of the good omens being observed, Vikram instantly gave the order to march. The border of the ravines which stretched between the river and the heath wasn't very big. Eventually, Deokali appeared, situated in the middle of the heath. It was a village that more or less resembled all the others of the Valley, with thatched roofs and awnings, clay walls and small courtyards; a little bigger than the others maybe, more opulent, with four or five cement houses and a modern temple at the summit of a mass of fallen rocks overlooking the fields.

During the trek, Devi had repeated Vikram's orders over and over again, what he had said down to the last word, afraid of losing a morsel; but what surprised her most when the band had scattered in the fields all around the village, was how quickly everything happened. She had scarcely had a chance to think

about Vikram who had gone in precisely the opposite direction; she had barely felt her heart beating faster as she neared the clay walls, the first that she had seen since her kidnapping. Unexpectedly, she heard Vikram's burst of fire, and everything followed a logical sequence: each bandit ran to his post, she followed suit. Without really knowing how, she ended up on the village square, standing on a well, the Mauser aimed at two stunned old men and a few scruffy children splashing about in a puddle.

She pulled herself together very quickly, and carried out Vikram's orders to the letter, firing three shots into the air. It was the first time in her life that she had pulled a trigger. Until then she had been satisfied to watch the men manipulate their arms, just after she had cleaned them. It left her neither hot nor cold; either the noise or the backlash.

In fact everything about the raid had been easy. Not one of the villagers had resisted. In less than three quarters of an hour, all the doors had been smashed in, all the chests had been broken open; some of the women had preferred to open them themselves to prevent their houses from being wrecked. Here and there, among the jewellery and the banknotes, the gangsters had found rifles. When Vikram thought that they had collected all the loot, he had fired another round of his machine-gun, and the band were reunited on the road that led to Maheshpur. All in all, the attack had lasted only one hour.

The gang quickly got back to the border of the ravines, running along the length of the river. Vikram selected some of the men to guard the booty. They slid with the bags into a crevice that was out of sight behind a thicket, and they arranged to meet an hour later, after the Maheshpur raid. As soon as the village was in view, Devi drew nearer to Vikram. He was moving mechanically, as though he no longer knew where he was or where he was going. All the same, she dared to whisper: 'Like the last time?' He answered: 'Like the last time?' And he fired another round into the air.

She rapidly went to the village square, as she had done in Deokali. But this time, when she arrived at the main pond she

nearly turned back. Nothing had changed at Maheshpur, not the watercress bed where the buffaloes frolicked about, nor her husband's house, just opposite with the terrace on which she had so often slept. Everything came flooding back cruelly.

So when she saw Vikram hurtling onto the square, just as she had fired her three shots aimed to terrify the villagers, it was more than she could bear; she couldn't remain silent. Pointing to Puttilal's house she shouted: 'Go over there; start with that one.' Two shadows ran across the terrace. The first in a red sari, was Moti who had an infant in her arms. She no longer, had the figure of the derisive adolescent who had managed to take her husband away from her. She had put on weight, and her body sagged. Despite being afraid, she ran ponderously. Puttilal, who followed, seemed on the contrary to have become far thinner; he was breathing quickly, as if he were sick.

Lukka and Kalla rushed up to break the door down. It quickly gave way. Vikram ran behind them. He had most likely heard Devi's scream, because he turned as he was about to cross the threshold and asked: 'Is this your husband's house?', and then entered it with a laugh. He signalled to Devi to join him: 'Go on, take your revenge.'

She didn't waste a moment. She jumped onto the terrace and screamed: 'I know where they are, I know where they are!' From the kitchen, Lukka barked: 'There is no one down below!'— 'Come over here!' Devi replied, and she sprang onto a little trap door cut into the corner of the terrace.

It wasn't Lukka but Vikram who joined her. 'In the loft, I'm sure of it,' she whispered to him. He unlatched the trapdoor and they found themselves in a dark room which smelt of stubble. In every corner of the room, large piles of lentils were stored. Vikram struck something metal with the rifle butt that he thrust into the grain: it was a big, aluminum container under which Puttilal was hiding.

He stretched himself slowly, showering the golden grains in around him. Devi started to blush: 'My dowry, give me back my dowry!' In the half-light of the loft, behind another pile of

lentils, she saw a bundle of fabric quivering: it was Moti, completely enshrouded in her sari. Hesitatingly, she extended her hand to Puttilal, as though she were asking him to resist, to refuse. He didn't even see her. He climbed down to the kitchen on the spot, surrounded by Vikram and Devi. He displaced a few bricks that were behind a stove, and removed a huge chest which he opened immediately in front of them, a bit like a peddler impatient to sell his goods. It contained a few lacquered bracelets, silver loops, necklaces, and a few knick-knacks; finally, there was a large wad of bank notes.

'My dowry!' Devi repeated.

Puttilal was trembling, some lentils continued to stream down his neck, there were even some in his ears. He handed her the box. As Devi was about to reach out, Vikram intercepted the movement, grabbed the chest and buried it in the bottom of his bag Then he pushed Devi outside:

'Get back to your post!'

She carried out his order at once. What was far more difficult for her on the other hand was to contain the desire to laugh. She could only really succumb when she reached the other side of the bank and their home, and Vikram spread out the jewellery and the money stolen from Puttilal on the tarpaulin with the rest of the booty; but as soon as he had done this, he scrammed.

## *26*

Without being oversuccessful, both raids yielded quite a decent profit. The men had managed to ferret out a few thousand rupees, four or five transistors and a large quantity of jewellery plus several watches. In Maheshpur, they went as far as to find a small supply of batteries, strangely stored in an old woman's house at the bottom of an earthenware jar. Vikram appeared to be particularly delighted with this last discovery: he was almost sure that the batteries would fit the walkie-talkie sets that he intended to buy in Gwalior from one of his dealer friends, as soon as the gang had collected enough money to update their equipment.

Before dividing the booty, he underlined the fact that this foray was unlike raids which had so rapidly brought in a fortune for the gang in Babu's time. But he had no desire to end up like the Singh brothers; he would prefer to take his time. Another four or five expeditions like this one, and the band would be ready to launch on a campaign of kidnappings. They would give themselves another two months to prepare and to trudge back up the ravines, taking their time, until they reached the confluence of the river with the Chambal estuary. Vikram was pretty sure that they could slip through unseen: according to his informers, the authorities of the two river states of the Valley had just come into open conflict. Despite the proceedings of the Central Government, the police were not transmitting any more information whatsoever concerning the activities of gangs. By changing river banks at each raid, the band would scarcely have to cover their tracks—if, that is, there were any tracks; because with all the confusion that prevailed among the police, he concluded, nothing was certain.

In fact, Vikram was being over-optimistic: as early as 15 August 1979, or the day after the attack, a report from the police in Kalpi informed all the neighbouring States that an extremely mobile and remarkably well-trained band was marauding the left-bank of the river. A very young woman was formally recognised by the victims as a simple vagabond from Sheikhpur Gura, where she had been involved a few months earlier in a case of stealing. The document was both a search and an arrest warrant directed to her, and signed by the same Uttar Pradesh police officer, who ordered an armed attack.

Two days later, a Kanpur newspaper reported in turn the Maheshpur and Deokali attack, in a paragraph written by an obscure hack. However, he managed to pick out, at the same time, the only interesting fact in the whole business: the participation of a young woman gangster in the attack. Neither the public at large, nor the lowliest politician paid any attention to this short article.

Strangely enough, Vikram and Devi heard about it. All through her escapades, Devi carried it with her, carefully folded

between the sheets of paper, ruling that her father was the rightful owner of his land. If we are to believe her story, Vikram gave it to her a few days after the attack. He himself had received it from one of his informers, who had hurried from his village to show it to him just as the band were getting ready to leave the camp and disappear once again into the maze of gorges.

The messenger, an illiterate peasant turned up around midday, just as they were finished with packing their kits, on a day the feeble sunshine was joyfully beginning to break through the ravines. He went straight to Vikram, handed him the sheet of newspaper, and without further ado, reeled off the text in one breath. Not for one second did Vikram lift his eyes from his kit. When the peasant had finished, he threw him a coin by way of an answer. Waiting for him to disappear he turned to Devi and said as he showed her the newspaper cutting:

'Did you hear? Now you are really one of us.'

She didn't bat an eyelid. From the moment the villager had turned on his heel and left, she had been stubbornly staring at the ground, scraping the earth with her foot, like an animal waiting to charge.

'Did you hear what he said?' Vikram insisted. 'The people of Maheshpur recognised you. Now, you are one of us. And you will never leave me again.'

He pressed the cutting into her hand. Devi looking weary, unfolded the paper, and glanced over the incomprehensible letters with a terrified expression. Then she stuffed it into one of her pockets and turned her head away.

'Do you regret it?' Vikram scolded. 'You had your revenge, didn't you? To spit on your husband and recover your dowry, that's what you wanted, isn't it!'

She didn't answer. He had never seen her like this before, head bowed, shut off and withdrawn into past memories of which he knew nothing. During the worst moments of their trudge through the gorges, when Babu had humiliated her and insulted her unceasingly, she had always had a lively look in her eye, and held herself proudly; and now, out of the blue, she was overwhelmed, completely stooped, as though crushed by an

immense burden. Only the muscles in her face resisted this oppression, they retracted, strained into a grimace.

Because of this, Vikram lost all confidence. Something suddenly came over him—something that wasn't usual in the gorges, an intense rush of words and sentences that no member of the gang had ever heard from him, except perhaps the day after a raid, when he had smoked an excess of charas. He moved closer to Devi with the same crazed smile that he had on those evenings. He did things that, as far back as any bandit could remember, no leader had ever done in front of his gang. He stroked her cheeks, her hair, spoke to her as if she were a child who didn't want to go to sleep, repeating again and again the same phrases: 'Listen Devi, you are one of us. Your misfortune served you well, it isn't that easy to join a band; you have suffered and you have proved yourself worthy, now you are with us, and your family is protected, and as everyone knows that you are in a gang, nobody, ever again, will dare attack either your father or your brother...' As he proceeded Devi recoiled further still. Her silence now weighed him down into a trap of his own making.

He didn't know what to say. His men drew closer, stiff and awkward, paralysed in turn by the web of silence. As the moment proved too unbearable, Vikram finally bent over his kit. Beside his machine-gun hung the Mauser that he had lent Devi during the attack. He unfastened it sharply, then came back to her and placed it at her feet.

'Take it. It's my wedding gift. I am taking you as my wife.'

At last she lifted up her eyes but she didn't pick the Mauser up. She gazed into the distance, towards the edge of the gorge that led down to the river, southwards, in the direction of her village; she concluded by shrieking:

'And what about the ten thousand rupees that my cousin gave you to kill me?'

In the circle of men behind Vikram, Lukka stepped forward:

'What is wrong with you now? The Mauser is worth far more!'

She didn't hear him, apparently. She started to scrape the

earth once more with her sandal. Her back continued to remain stooped, still wizened under the same invisible burden. Vikram bent over for the gun one more time; but on this occasion he placed it on her shoulder, as he had done the morning of the raid:

'Go on Devi. It's yours. And you, you are mine.'

She now straightened up, the sun directly in her face, and became once more, the woman he had always known, resolute and lively, as hard as steel, and tough. And she was cheeky. As she was picking up her kit and taking her place in the file that was by now setting off, she couldn't stop herself from retorting:

'That's good, Vikram Mallah. You are right to take me. Only, don't ever forget that with me, you are also taking on all my revenge.'

With this she followed him without another word into the western gorge, which, led to the Chambal river, and where, since time began, the bitter seeds of evil flow.



'It was that day, Lukka recalled, that they all realized that things would take a turn for the worse, unless they did something. All that, because of the Mauser. I am sure Vikram gave it to her on an impulse, because he was in a hurry to leave. He knew perfectly well, however, that you must deserve it. You buy it with the profits that you have made, you steal it, but you never give a rifle away, and especially not to a woman. And as a wedding present, in the bargain...'

According to Lukka, that was the night that everything went haywire. All day long, Devi had been herself, she had kept quiet, continued to look after the cooking, carrying her kit in silence, cleaning the arms without grumbling. But the very same day as she had received the gun, she began to have nightmares. She woke up screaming, she shouted Babu's name loudly, as well as Mayadin's; and a stranger's name too, a certain Mansukh, who she eventually revealed, was a policeman from Kalpi who had

tried to rape her when she had been arrested. She couldn't go back to sleep again. She sobbed for hours on end; and when she stopped, she begged Vikram to let her go alone into the gorges with her Mauser to take revenge.

The nights that followed were the same. Despite, many herbal remedies, Devi awoke each might with a start, torn apart by an eternal scream. It was almost always at the same time. Gradually, the ghosts wandering in the limbo of her memory came to life, initially vague and obscure, but then breaking through her consciousness. She gave out a long cry, sat bolt upright, and looked frantically for an exit to a room that didn't exist, as they were sleeping under the stars now that the rains had passed. She often muttered: I no longer have a roof over my head.' Then she broke into sobs; and when she finally stopped crying, she was always uttering the same word: revenge.

'Vikram did everything he could, but it didn't change anything, Lukka recounted. Nevertheless, he blamed himself for everything.

He told her he had fallen in love with her at first sight when the idiotic Kailash had brought her to the party in the temple of Hanuman. He told her repeatedly that he was the one who had organised her kidnapping, that Mayadin had nothing to do with it. Apparently, he had only suggested killing her in order to have her to himself and at any price, to obliterate the shame that had fallen on her the day she had been forced to sleep with Babu. He also promised her that if she truly wanted to take revenge on the policeman and her cousin, he would take care of it as soon as he could; he and he alone because revenge wasn't a woman's job. However, the more he said on the subject, the further she dug in her heels.

'I simply had to do something about the situation,' Lukka asserted. 'One fine morning, I took Vikram aside. I spoke to him, I told him to either take it or leave it.'

Lukka was, however, a man of few words. When he had something to say, he sang; and it only happened the day after an attack, in the hiding places, after the loot had been shared out. He took a little accordion out of his bag, and started to

hum bandit songs, old songs of rebellion, as old as the hills, which he often interpreted in his own way, with long verses on the blackness of Kali and life-giving purgative bleeding. But despite all this Lukka had killed quite a few men in the Valley including even women and children. At fourteen, he joined the gang of Man Singh, a famous bandit who could massacre an entire village including the infants and the old men, simply because he suspected an enemy was hiding there. Man Singh was stupidly involved in a raid that caught him unawares while he was in the middle of a siesta. Lukka pretended that he couldn't get over Man Singh's death; and that his inclinations, in any case, were not towards women. Later in life, he became fond of a young boy, Kalla, whom he initiated into the life of a bandit, and who stayed firmly by his side.

What was most bizarre about his life, was that he never tried to become the leader of a gang. After Man Singh's death, he moved from one band to another. A superb runner, a more discriminating shooter over the years, a hit-man of a quality that had rarely been seen before, who was never affected by slaughter, who always had a precise aim and was capable of doing away with a man, Lukka, invariably got away from the police. At the end of the fifties, he joined up with Lal Singh, the only brigand whose command of terror never challenged the memory of Man Singh. In 1959, the day before an attack, Lal Singh had organised a human sacrifice, in order to gain favours from the Goddess, and so he had decapitated five villagers in the precincts of one of her temples. Among the instigators of this funereal liturgy, Lukka, apparently, was the only one to survive. A few months later, Lal Singh and most of his men were shot down by the police after a memorable combat on the banks of the river. Everyone in the Valley thought that he was going to take over from his leader.

He didn't take the initiative. One fine morning he left to go to the furthest end of the gorges, with his rifle and his accordion. There he wandered by himself for months on end. Just as the baghis had all given him up for a madman, he decided to join up with the Singh brothers.

Even while Lukka sang, he could see far into the distance; way beyond the present moment. When he had seen, and if it was necessary, he struck. Wordlessly and without warning. Then he'd look at the corpse without commenting. And forget about it. Or at least, he seemed to. By dint of having lived nothing other than the life of a bandit, he seemed to be devoid of memories. He never spoke about his past. All they knew about him was what others had repeated. His friend Kalla wasn't any more talkative than he was. He was happy to follow him blindly.

So Vikram thought he had it, when he saw Lukka coming towards him, his eyes narrowed in anger, towards the end of one of these nights when Devi's nightmares had once more woken all the men. The two sentences that he whispered, resonated in his ear like a double death threat: 'Vikram Mallah, the girl you are sleeping with is introducing things that are dangerously evil into the gang. Either you get rid of her, or I will.'



'I can't,' Vikram replied instantly. 'If you kill her, you will have to kill me too.'

The pupil of Lukka's eye constricted even more. It was his final word, and they both knew it; Vikram because he had never seen Lukka wasting his time in discussion with anyone before; Lukka, because he had chosen the only hour that he could be alone with Vikram.

'We cannot keep her,' Lukka continued. 'She is obsessed with revenge and fear.'

'Kill me with her,' Vikram repeated.

He sat down on his backpack, hunched over his machine-gun and set about scrubbing the butt. For once, Lukka's face looked slightly troubled.

'It was like a bolt out of the blue,' Vikram added. 'It's like hate, a knot, the...'.

He pointed to his stomach, grimacing, then spun like a toy

the statuette of the Goddess that hung from his gun.

'... a knot that you cannot untie.'

And he added, as the metal reflection continued to pivot one last time:

'I mean, look at you with Kalla.'

'Don't bring Kalla in to it.'

'It is the same thing, though.'

Lukka glimpsed the smiling face of Kalla. He turned his attention back to Vikram:

'You know, at least, that revenge isn't easy. You know full well that it is something you must learn.'

'I have told you to kill me with her.'

'You are a bandit, Lukka went on, 'You know perfectly well that our lives will never be sweet.'

'With her, life is sweet.'

On this occasion Lukka didn't react. He simply lowered his eyes, started to examine his fingers in turn, looking beneath his nails at the extraordinary deposits of filth. He then lifted his head, and puffed himself out as if he were about to strike up an air; and sure enough it was the first verse of a song that he hummed to Vikram in guise of an answer, a reedy voice, embittered with irony:

'From honey to the taste of cinders...'

Vikram swung around. He picked up his machine-gun, and threw it at Lukka's feet:

'Take my place, Lukka. Shoot this girl, and me with her. You can start with me if you like. You have just enough time left.'

Lukka's eyes had darkened over yet again, they had assumed the colour of the stones that can be found at the river's source at the summit of the mountains in the South, where the earth mingles with minerals whose facets are as smooth as a knife-blade fresh from a smithy; their black light became more cutting with each second, like the speed of the calculations that were turning over in his subconscious, in the silence that was his alone.

'Do it quickly,' Vikram repeated, and he brought his hand to his neck, where his amulet hung.

Probably, that is when everything changed. A talisman shone

under Lukka's shirt, almost identical to his own, except that the stone seemed older, even more speckled, but with the same flakes of mica, or rather silver traces, because the sparkle was less elusive, more intense.

'Of course, if the Guru were...'

Devi's form, her shoulders bent by the jerrycans, appeared on the footpath that led down to the springs.

'There she is,' Vikram muttered.

In trousers, her posture had assumed a grace that was out of the ordinary; ambiguous, perturbing, somehow male and female at the same time, like certain gods engraved on stone in the old temples.

Not losing a moment, Vikram adopted the attitude and gestures of the leader: straightened his back, and tensed up. With one sweeping look he inspected the camp, closely examined the sky and the heights of the cliffs. He lifted up his machine-gun, and passed it over his shoulder; when he advanced towards Lukka, ready to insult him, the entire violence of the gorges seemed to linked to his:

'You prefer that the Guru kills her, is that it? You prefer him to do it because I told you that if you wanted to get rid of her, you would have to get rid of me too, and you couldn't be bothered commanding a gang?'

He adjusted the barrel of his gun on his shoulder, before adding:

'Send her to the Guru, if you like. But I don't want to hear any more about it. Do you hear me? No more.'

The men approached them, lighthearted and fresh. Now Lukka was the one who seemed worn out, and as Devi emerged from the footpath, he mumbled without looking at Vikram:

'What if the Guru discovers shakti in her? Did you ever consider that? She will be cured of her fear, but she will also be cured of you, Vikram Mallah. She will do what she wants with you; and with us too.... She will lead us like the bewitched flute of the snake-charmers....'

It was a murmur that went on forever, muted, smothered, yet at the same time full of anger and threat:

'Who knows.... A girl that has held out against everything! Her husband, her family, her village! Who went to live with strangers.... Who defied Babu in front of us. Who was maybe the death of him, who knows.... You know yourself, have you just thought of how we came to be in this situation? How do we know it isn't thanks to the shakti after all....' He cut himself off. A different kind of exhaustion crushed him, more profound, more extreme: he had run out of words. But his anger was such that he found the energy to grumble:

'You know where it began with this girl, Vikram Mallah, but you don't know where it is going to end. Or how.... I know of many incidents concerning bandits and women, I started young, I have seen a lot. And you Vikram, you will see that....'

Vikram didn't allow him to finish. He grabbed his arm, then his fingers, forcing them back onto his palms.

'Take her to the Guru. For the rest....'

But Vikram didn't get a chance to finish his sentence; for now Devi was in front of him, placing her jerrycans at his feet, like an offering.

As for Lukka, he assumed his old veneer of distant and impenetrable harshness once more, and Vikram hoodwinked him by declaring to all present, as though ending the most futile of conversations:

'The rest Lukka, as you well know, is written in the stars....'

## *29*

They were words without importance, the kind of remarks you hear a hundred times a day along the roads and rivers. It was nothing to get excited about, nothing to be alarmed over; what's more, when Devi heard this remark, it never even crossed her mind that Vikram was speaking about her.

What she guessed, however, and what surprised her, was that he had succeeded in dragging these words from a man like Lukka, a man who never spoke. But as everything resumed as it had done the day before. Devi followed the band as she always

had, resigned to remaining close on Vikram's heels and to string along blindly.

So she walked without turning a hair; but as the hours passed, her concentration wandered and her step became less confident. She only found her drive again when Etawah came into view towards the end of the afternoon, at the summit of a steep transverse valley. It was a town. A place in which they had to scatter, disguised as peasants, and for extremely good reasons: to buy ammunition, or resell booty.

The band didn't tarry on the crest. As soon as Etawah was within sight, the men instinctively ran below, sheltered by a girdle of hillocks—large, dusty, dunes that the last monsoon had failed to blow away into the gorges.

Only Vikram and Lukka stood stock still between the peaks which over looked the valley and its town. Devi glanced worriedly at the two men. There was no doubt about it, words were going to be exchanged; and this time, they would not be meaningless. With this sharp chasm which had been created between the band and its leader, the men had also anticipated remarks, phrases that would force the paths of destiny to take a new direction, and they stayed transfixed behind one of the hillocks. Only Kalla had attempted to take a few steps towards Lukka. The latter had stopped him at once and composedly, lowered his joined hands towards him, like a priest calling on the peace of the gods for the newborn, or young herds; for once Devi wanted to estrange herself from Vikram.

He didn't give her the opportunity to do so. He took her by the waist, and shoved her towards a track that descended into the valley. Then the words that they had all been waiting for swept down on her:

'Devi, take your own clothes back. You are leaving.'

She didn't have the energy to resist, nor to stutter in reply. Vikram immediately followed this up by pushing her with his rifle butt into Lukka's arms:

'With him.'

Now she was really startled, and turning around, caught the dazed look on Kalla's face, together with Vikram's profile. His

jaw muscles had withdrawn into a glowering knot. At that very moment, she received a sharp blow on the nape of her neck. She must have lost consciousness for quite a while, because when she picked herself up, she was at the bottom of the corrie, alone in front of Lukka without a gun. The gang had disappeared. Lukka instantly threw a folded old sari at her head and ordered her to put on her own clothes again.

She didn't argue. Indifferently he watched her undress, pulling her bodice over her chest which had grown thin, tying on her saree. Then he seized her uniform, which he later stuffed under a pile of stones at a crossroads.

As usual he didn't utter a word. He didn't even inquire as to whether she had recovered enough strength to face the descent to the town. The band waited at the spot. Kalla remembers, in fact, that Vikram waited quite a while before giving the order to set off again. For a long time he stayed at the top of the cliff, leaning against a piton watching Devi hopping after Lukka.

Kalla also said that when he saw her disappearing down to the bottom of the valley, Vikram had turned westwards and howled a string of obscenities. They were not directed at Devi, but at the gods, ignoring their glory in the setting sun.

## *30*

Lukka didn't let her out of his sight. His presence itself was like a prison. Even when he was staring into the distance, his gaze always seemed to be fixed on her. They avoided Etawah and crossed a field of millet, and stopped at a halt for trucks and buses on the highway where the drink-sellers set up their stalls. To her amazement, Lukka offered her an orangeade. Devi hadn't had any since her escapade in Kanpur, when she had wanted to marry Kailash. She shamelessly grabbed the bottle, and drank it in big gulps. She was wiping her mouth with a corner of her sari when he revealed where he was taking her to: 'To a Guru' he said, his voice hissing like a billhook's; 'to a Baba who will

cure you of fear. Vikram is the one who wants it. You will be treated. If you succeed, you will come back to the gang.' And that was that.

Out of the blue, Devi's step lightened. Somewhere in her eye, the sparkle that he hated most about her ever since she had become Vikram's mistress, returned. He regretted there and then having spoken to her. 'At that moment, I thought of killing her,' he admitted later. 'In a ditch, during the night, nobody would have been any the wiser. Or even during the day. It was easy. So many things happen on the road. And it wasn't because of a lack of willpower.'

It wasn't a question of time either, because the trip lasted almost a week. They finally reached the place where the noxious waters of the Chambal estuary throw themselves into the river. At this point, Lukka told her they were going to cross over to the other side, and he turned due south, from east.

It was evening. They had to depend on the good will of the boatman, a lazy, emaciated ferryman who reminded Devi of her father. When they reached the other side, everything was already in darkness. They had to sleep on the riverbank, in the sand, and the night brought with it its share of nightmares. But the next day, she took heart once more. The country was nothing like she had seen before. They entered a forest, with a profusion of all kinds of trees, Indian lilac trees whose bark cleansed the mouth, the kikar tree, the babul tree and thickets of eucalyptus in which deer took refuge. In spite of the undergrowth, the paths were far more accessible than in the ravines, never very steep, undoubtedly maintained by the tribesmen—the few who spent long periods before the gods, who still killed their prey with stone weapons and buried themselves deep in the brambles as soon as a stranger approached. Over two days of walking, Lukka and Devi caught sight of about ten of these people, pausing in front of altars embellished in black stone which roughly symbolised a vulva. They were young and half naked. More often than not they were dark-skinned women with long legs, their necks weighed down with heavy, bone necklaces. Lukka had scarcely looked in their direction when they fled, becoming

shadows almost as furtive as the monkeys on the treetops, or the herd of deer. All that remained of them on the pathway was a faint, feline odour, or sometimes a red flower abandoned on the stone's genitals.

On the second day of the trek, there was also, on the side of the road, a tiger's footprint and a little further on, the tail and the hoofs of a doe, the remnants of his meal. Devi froze. 'You see, you do need to be cured of fear,' Lukka sniggered. It was the first time he had spoken to her since they had crossed the river. She hardly heard what he was saying. She had once more slept very badly; the shrieking of jackals and the intermittent cries of strange birds conjured up unknown dangers in the darkness.

They walked for half of that day. They were cutting through a large thicket of eucalyptus, when a few steps away from her and Lukka, right in the middle of the path, she saw a tiny, almost naked man emerge, armed with a long stick, a grain necklace around his neck, and bushy hair rolled into an enormous chignon on the top of his head. It was hard to tell whether he was young or old, in the same way as it was impossible to define his skin colour as that of earth or of roots. It was as though he had just come straight out of the ground at that very moment. Lukka flung himself at his feet almost immediately. He started to kiss his ankles, his toes; in his fervour he was actually burrowing his nose in the dust. The other had placed his hands on his head for some time now, then caressed him in the same way as you would do a child, to calm him down, or to bless him. But he never once looked at Lukka.

He only had eyes for Devi.

Then something strange happened. A sort of dizziness, she said; maybe it was a ray of sunshine that cut through the shrubs; and lit up the bowls that he wore slung across his chest, or maybe it was the mark drawn in bhasma on his forehead. In any case, she said her eyes became lost in those of the little man's, as though she had known him all her life.

Furthermore, the first words he spoke to her, as he forced Lukka to get up, were those of someone rediscovered after years of absence. He opened up his matchstick arms to her, and said:

'You're mine, you came to me.'

With that she knew that she had found the Guru. She too threw herself at his feet, her eyes blurred with tears, as she clasped his ankles and his toes. For a while, she saw nothing, heard nothing, not even Lukka running away in the opposite direction, nor the rustling of the eucalyptus leaves as he passed them.

*31*

Devi was an easy, but also not that easy a person. Someone confirmed that Baba Narayan was one of the last Great Gurus in the depths of the forest, to possess the strange secrets of Nagashakti; gentle one day, hard the next, showing simultaneous tenderness and darkness, outwardly a consuming fire, inside a honeycomb, if not even the other way around, or all of these things at the same time.

The road to self-release wasn't painless. It entailed many words and hardships; she had taken a while to find the source of her strength. Unceasingly, she came back to the night she was kidnapped. One day the Guru retorted: 'It is not what has happened that counts, little idiot. It is the way you remember it.' And with that, he shook her with such violence that she rolled into the dust. For several days, he said nothing more to her. She had to beg him to continue the rest of the trials. Already, she was no longer the same girl.

Nevertheless, he never pronounced mantras; there was no cauldron of herbs, no intoxicating music. Devi and he lived alone, right beside a small temple at the end of a clearing, where a spring bubbled. Perhaps, Baba Narayan was familiar with her body, or on the contrary he respected it. Maybe he repelled it violently, as some Gurus do, by daubing it with her faeces and forcing her to eat it. Or it is possible that they were satisfied to brush against each other, to share the same water, the same roots. We don't know, we never will: the rules imposed on all of those who have received lessons from the Great Guru forbid

any revelation of the laughter and tears that led them to self-awareness. Apparently, like the others, Baba Narayan must have forced her to look for her own food by crawling along the thankless ground of the jungle, and spending several days without eating or drinking. He must have tied her up at night on a willow trellis, left her to the mercy of wild animals and so obliged her to face all the demons on earth. Whatever the case may be, it is inevitable that he gave her the knowledge of Kundalini Shakti, the oldest kind, of the ancient forest; the force of which is uncoiled slowly and not in a flash of lightening.

When she returned, Devi knew the legend of the Nagaraja's by heart. She could recite in one breath their astounding history, the nexus of the Sun and the Moon which gave them life, right up until their exile underground, where they became the guardians of treasure and precious stones, such as the fabulous stone which makes all wishes come true. In fact, it was a fragment of this stone that Baba Narayan presented to his disciples—according to what he says—at the end of their trials. For Devi, it was a tiny black pebble, pink-veined, with a touch of bluish crystal which she always insisted was a sapphire.

There was a hole in the stone, which was threaded through with a piece of cord. When the time came to put it around her neck, the Guru delivered a long incantation. It wasn't a routine prayer, like the ones you hear all too often from the mouths of mainstream gurus. They were vibrant words from the old forest, a chant that dated back to ancient times, when the gods were nothing more than seeds in the rounded breast of the Sky and the Earth. He sat down, closed his eyes, and breathed in deeply; then he joined his hands and brought them to his forehead in a gesture to protect the sacred words from the impurity of substance; and then he said: 'Devi, may hatred protect your youth. Don't give in to your sadness anymore. Smile. Smile at the blood the thirsty earth absorbs. Smile at its clots that congeal in the dust. Answer a word of hatred with a word of hatred, a deadly blow with a deadly blow. Turn your heart into a carnivorous wolf. Intoxicate yourself with anger, exhaust your entrails with your bitterness. Render the darkness darker still.

Learn that in you heart there are thousands of mysteries. Hunt down the wickedness that lies within you, get used to the blackness. Make yourself steely, for docility precludes courage. Shun pity as though it were poison. Learn to love the warm smell of blood. Become a smokeless fire, an unstoppable force. May blood be your pride and joy.'

With this, he gently stroked the stone that he had just put around her neck and explained that those who experienced the Kundalini shakti were few and far between, but that she was one of them, now that she wore the amulet. 'From now on, your hatred is pure, he added. 'You are approaching detachment, Devi, and contempt for the taste of sweetness. You are going to forget your fear, you are going to enter a world in which man is no longer the measure of woman. You will no longer know what this measure even is. Daughter, wife or mother, you will be all of these things at the same time, you will be outrageousness and madness, wisdom and terror, life and destruction. Each breath you take will be an act of rebellion. Your law will reign over every other. You will give birth to murder, not to children. You will be the Elusive One, she who changes from one second to the next; the Invincible who can find her way through blood, possess the strength to seduce the Kundalini. Go with a joyful heart to this black spring. Yes, Devi, the core of things is terrible, but run to it lightheartedly, observe it in all its horror. You came to me weighed down with fear, talking in your sleep, looking for a roof that didn't exist, blinded by yourself and your poor life. Now that your blood is pure, you will be able to drink the blood of you enemy, more delicious than your mother's milk, smoother than the smoothest of liquor. Now that you are leaving me, you are no longer miserable, you are walking away in complete command of yourself. In water you will be water, under the sun you will be fire. In autumn you will be a fresh leaf, in winter as hard as frost, as dry as the wind that knocks down the weak. In the forest you will hear silence, in the desert the music of emptiness. Everything echoes in this world Devi, your soul as well as the dust on the roadside. Now that you are peaceful, begin walking again,' face the world

through which blood, urine and seed run, fearlessly. Go in peace, Devi, because I have read the secret in your eyes. I recognised the Goddess and her strength in your pupils. But even more dense than this jungle, is the forest of illusion. Never forget this, on the road that will lead you back to your man.' And then he was silent.

She collapsed at his feet, she repeated over and over again, sobbing at length: 'Keep me, guru, keep me!' He didn't answer. He returned to the end of the temple, and came back with a large razor. She heard him murmuring above her the prayer invoking the Goddess. 'Expel your bloody breath on this woman, make the vapour of her revenge wither,' and so it went on, but with a voice that became increasingly weaker. Then in one move, he cut off her plait, which he threw without delay into the undergrowth where it fell like a dead snake.

She let out a scream. He whispered: 'Don't look behind you Devi; you are yourself at last.' Then he put his hands on the shaved nape of her neck, and disappeared to the far end of the clearing, walking as he usually did, in a composed and light-footed manner, as he had done the very first day. She found herself alone. She cried for a while, but then her sobs gradually became less frequent. Finally, she looked up at the sky which she found abnormally transparent. She concluded that winter was coming, that the nights would soon be cold, that she wanted to see the river again and to feel Vikram's skin against her own once more. So exactly as Lukka had done, she took the road to the gorges a second time at full speed, as if she had just stolen a treasure.

## *32*

Since the monsoon, everyone in the small town of Sheikhpur Gura had given Devi up for dead. The night she was kidnapped the villagers had kept a vigil for a long time beneath a fine drizzle, the sound of which proclaimed that she would finish in accordance with the order of things, at the bottom of the ravines,

herself mud, now returning to mud. Only Nathu had caught a glimpse of a veiled silhouette surrounded by other forms. There had been a struggle, muffled screams, torchlight pointed in the direction of the road that led down to the river; and that was all.

But Moola, Devi's own mother simply couldn't accept that her daughter was dead. She was the only person left to shake off, with all her being the inertia of the monsoon, a woman least expected to possess this kind of ferocious energy. Grown thin, her back stiffened with an impenetrable vitality, Moola came and went without respite, her jaws clenched, her mouth hardened, her hand still accurate but her mind forgetful, tormented at the same time by worry and willpower, always on the lookout even at night time when the people succumbed to the swaying of the rains. In the afternoon, when she finally sank down under her awning, it wasn't, like the other women, to kill the time picking over the lentils or endlessly rubbing pans that had already been scrubbed the day before. She always went through the same motions—not any less useless, but the neighbours saw it as the height of stupidity, given the fact her daughter was supposedly dead. She took Devi's sari out of her chest. She only had one left, red with a sprinkling of yellow flowers and orange coloured stripes, fit for special occasions. Moola used to unfold it, spread it out on a string in the centre of the awning, protected from the downpours; then for hours on end, crouched at the end of her small courtyard, she would watch the fabric fluttering on the cord.

It was through this obsession that Nathu who came from time to time to wander nearby, finally understood what was going on in her head. Having wasted a lifetime washing, Nathu knew all the clothes and their owners; he was capable of telling you, just by looking at a shred of cotton drying by the riverside, which villager was sick and in which family, who would soon become a father, and who was going to die. So the moment he saw Moola spreading it out on her line Nathu knew that it was Devi's sari. In the beginning he thought that she wanted to sell it, that she was airing it so that it wouldn't become mildewed. But when he saw that Moola did the same thing every afternoon,

staring for unknown lengths of time at the cotton swaying in the wind, he guessed that she was waiting for her daughter.

It required a blind faith to keep ready each day, in the middle of the monsoon, a sari without the slightest fold, which smelt clean, as if she was about to spring out of the murky waters in which the world was drowning, at any moment. It also required total oblivion. Moola had effaced everything, her cowardice, her silence; even the disgust she had for Devi when she gave her very first cry. Perhaps too, the appeals she had made to her, following her disastrous marriage when she had asked her to jump into the well. And now that she had accepted the bargain she had made with the bandits, to keep her son at the peril of her daughter, Moola was forcing herself to believe that she was still alive. It was far from remorse. The unfolding of the sari every day in front of the whole village was something akin to a prayer. Or perhaps more than that: a sign of a sort of determination.

Nathu, with his sharp eye, was the only one to have a premonition. He was also the only one who followed Moola when she took the risk of going into the ravines, the first woman in the entire village, and before Dussehra had been celebrated.

But he didn't follow her for very long. He thought that she wanted to die as her daughter had, that she was going to disappear into the void of mud. Nevertheless, he watched her closely, discreetly for a while from the heights of the gorges. To his amazement, he saw her taking the road to Kalpi.

In fact, it wasn't very difficult to imagine what was taking Moola to Kalpi. She was quite simply going to complain to the police.



She did as her daughter would have done, she went there directly, crossed the square in Kalpi, her head held high, and walked past the office of the policeman Mansukh, who had promised jeeps the night of the kidnapping and hadn't kept his word. By the simple throbbing of an enormous fan she found

the superintendent's office, at the end of a corridor lit with a neonlight. The door was open. Before the policeman keeping vigil could react, she had run to the end of the corridor and pushed the door ajar. The superintendent, called Singhal, was startled. After a moment's hesitation, Moola pulled herself together and imparted in one breath what she had to say.

This woman, for whom words were always either enemies or traitors, lost her reedy voice, and spoke loudly and clearly, saying her daughter had been kidnapped the night it had rained heavily during the monsoon. She also said that the policeman Mansukh, had promised aid and protection, but that he hadn't come; and now that her daughter had disappeared, they had to find her again, no matter what it took, because it was all too cruel, because justice should be done.

Behind her, the door had remained open. That was her only mistake. She hadn't yet finished speaking, when Mansukh hurtled into the room.

'That family of whores!' he roared. 'These whores and thieves!'

He shouted so loudly that he blocked out the drone of the fan. Then he grabbed Moola by the waist and dragged her out onto the corridor. Behind his desk superintendent Singhal hadn't moved. He merely sighed, then stopped his fan for a few minutes, just to see what was going on outside.

'Get out, get out!' Mansukh yelled at the top of his voice. 'Family of dogs! Never come here again!'

There were a few muffled noises, blows undoubtedly. A door slammed. The superintendent switched his fan back on again, pushing the high speed button so that he couldn't hear the rest. It was always the same thing: they came to whimper, to shout beneath his windows. To get rid of those who made a nuisance of themselves, they sometimes had to cudgel them. Just from looking at the burnt eyes of this woman it was clear that they would get to that point with her too. It exhausted him just thinking about it.

For once he was wrong. Thrown into the puddle, in the square, Moola picked herself up uncomplainingly, and

straightaway took the road leading back to her village, haughty as before, spurred on by her unshakable faith.

The weeks that followed were like all the others. No one asked her where she had gone, not even her husband, and she didn't speak about it to anyone. It was almost as if she saw nothing, not the sky which was once more serene, not the feasts, nor the fields that were now greener, or even the dust that had replaced the mud.

On the other hand, it would appear that she remained watchful, because she was the first woman to learn, one evening in January 1980, what the men were discussing among themselves under the sacred peepal tree, after the village leader had read the newspaper. There had been a crime in a neighbouring market town. One of its inhabitants had been killed with a machine-gun, a policeman who worked in Kalpi. He had been murdered in cold blood one morning as he was leaving for his office. The man's name was Mansukh Mallah; he was from the same caste as his killer, a woman. It was, they suspected, none other than Devi.

Nathu spied Moola collapsing at the foot of a low stone wall. She had suddenly let herself go, as if she had wanted to let her body and soul dissolve into the earth itself. She began to sigh. A deep breath came from the pit of her stomach, as if it had held all her hopes for weeks and months.

As a result, she missed the witty remark that Krishna made half-proudly, half-jeering: 'I would like to run into her again, now that she has murdered a cop. A girl who has bumped off a guy, must really be something in bed.'



The search and arrest warrant brought against Devi, is dated 26 January 1980 and signed by superintendent Singhal, head of the Kalpi police station. By the beginning of February, the news was all over the Valley.

The murder of a policeman wasn't unusual. Over a year or

two, the authorities had lost at least thirty men. But the murderers rarely attacked people of their own caste and it was even more exceptional that the criminal should be a woman.

This is what grabbed the attention of the journalists. At the same time, not one of the small paragraphs given over to the affair, either in the Gwalior press or the Kanpur and Agra newspapers, alluded to the ghost of Putli, the legendary Bandit Queen. Although, they suspected what the motives were, without ever bringing them into the open, they preferred to see the assassination of Mansukh Mallah as the act of a mad woman. It wasn't difficult: in years past, there had been cases of girls suddenly possessed by the demon of revenge, and there had been a few of them in the Valley itself. In 1975, it was Kantula: a simple cook who followed a gang, went into a trance after the raids and instead of running away, came back to wander among the corpses and rip their eyes out. Around the same time, there was also Munni, the one whose only regret at the time of her arrest was that she, hadn't had enough time to cut the throats of her entire in-laws family. There had also been Chunni, Phoolshi, Gita, all formidably quick on the draw. And Kapuri, the talk of the town, who only attacked men to kill them, never to steal from them. As she squinted and couldn't shoot straight, she had chosen to attack them with bicycle chains. The few policemen who had thought they could arrest her, died like all the others, knocked out, then beaten to death. The general opinion was that these women were lone, lost souls; or when they didn't operate alone, had been enslaved by pitiless rascals, following in their footsteps towards the worst forms of cruelty.

In an attempt to combat this madness of the ravines, the authorities resorted to some tough measures. In 1978, when the police shot down Hasina, one of the toughest among them, her mutilated corpse, entirely naked, was paraded for many days in the middle of the village square. She was several months pregnant. When the body began to decompose, they refused to return it to her family, and they threw it to the vultures during the night. Since then, no woman, even blinded by vindictive passion, had taken the risk of attacking a policeman.

From journalists to policemen, all tried hard to believe after Mansukh's murder was announced, that the jeeps and helicopters had brought change. But for the peasants from the Valley, the facts existed, calmly and unbearably obvious. A woman had killed a man; a prowler, a policeman; a woman who was a Mallah, a man who was a Mallah. Such a savage act was beyond comprehension, without reference to the memory of the great adventuress.

An increasing number of women began openly reviving the old songs that evoked the wild and sad deeds of the Bandit Queen. It was the case everywhere, even as far as Sheikhpur Gura, where Moola found it difficult to conceal her feelings of pride. Only few and far between could ignore, how out of the blue, the legend had come back to life. A few, out of spite, tried to be indifferent: Mayadin, of course, and uncle Gurudayal. But their pique was blatant, as was that of the police.

As was the bitterness of a woman at the far end of the ravines towards the confluence of the river with the Chambal estuary. She frequently returned to wander around the camp abandoned by Vikram and his band at the end of the monsoon: the proud, corpulent Kusumana, the same woman that Vikram, at the height of their passion, had nicknamed as though he had a premonition, Fire-in-the-Backside.

## *35*

Hatred drawn out is better than swift anger goes a proverb in the Valley. It is possible to believe that it was tailor-made for Kusumana: six whole months passed between the moment she realized that Devi had taken her place at Vikram's side, and the day she found a way to take her revenge.

Six months of bitterness and cold fury. But Kusumana knew how to deceive everyone. In the village where she lived with her two daughters since she became a widow—a tiny, isolated hamlet—none of her rancour was ever apparent. Smiling and silent, with a solemn step, she continued to come and go

between the well and the river, appearing to the whole world to be a visiting queen. Everyone knew however, during the last monsoon, that she was wasting her time trying to reunite with her former lover's gang, that philanderer of the ravines who had the nerve to kill his leader and who, according to rumours, was capable of becoming one the biggest gangsters the Valley had ever known. Everyone was aware of the fact that he had taken another woman, they even knew the name of the woman that had replaced her. A terror, apparently, a young female hooligan, for she lived with the band and had taken it upon herself to frighten off her rival.

In the village, they also all knew how Kusumana had met Vikram two years previous to that, in her uncle, the old Papu's house, just after her husband's death. The Singh brothers had ordered Vikram, a young and retiring carrier then, to bring back girls. When an embarrassed Vikram passed on this request to Papu, he proposed his niece, much to his astonishment.

'She is a widow, she costs me a lot of money,' the uncle argued. He rubbed his belly, looking annoyed about something. Vikram glanced furtively at Kusumana. There was a long moment's hesitation, then he threw at Papu's feet the wad of banknotes that he had requested. He then brought the woman to the camp with the rest of the goods. There Kusumana was shared between the men, as everything else was. During the few weeks of respite, she slept with all the gangsters—with the exception of Lukka and Kalla, as could be expected. She never complained, she cooked and washed without making a fuss. Then the Singh brothers moved camp. She returned to her village as though nothing had happened, but there, everybody noticed that she had changed. She scolded her little girls and didn't like going down to the river anymore. In warm or cold weather, she could always be seen on the edge of the roadside, looking out for the thick cloud of dust which would announce the return of the band.

She waited for one year. Vikram came back to buy his supplies at uncle Papu's, as he had done the year before and he brought Kusumana back, as he had the time before, although Papu had

bargained and he had to pay more money this time round. In the camp, Kusumana continued to sleep with whoever wanted her. But the men were tired of her. They held against her the fact that she made too much noise during love-making. By the end of the week, Vikram was practically the only one left to be satisfied with her. They spent hours without surfacing from their tarpaulin. When the rains ceased, the elder of the two Singh brothers decided to associate her with gang, but only for the raid in the Chambal gorges. Kusumana carried the bags of food without turning a hair, and prepared the meals docilely. Then the gang set off once more to plunder the other end of the Valley, and she was sent back to her village, exactly like the last time. Before two months were up, Vikram had visited her. He came back often. He arrived as night was falling, and left again just before dawn; he was permanently exhausted. Kusumana didn't want him to pay her any more, despite the reproving remarks her uncle Papu muttered, while watching them make love through the trellis which separated their two bedrooms. Following his last visit in the middle of spring, Kusumana declared that the next time Vikram came she would follow him into the ravines. Uncle Papu said nothing. He knew that promises had been exchanged between her and Vikram, dangerous words that people utter following the love act. He did nothing to stop her when, at the end of the monsoon, she went to join up with the band.

When she was driven away from the camp, Kusumana didn't blame Vikram. All her resentment was directed at the woman. A speechless anger. But Kusumana was patient. Hatred was a way of life for her. Nevertheless, she took her time honing it, pampering it. She had just grown a little more stocky over these past few months. But this shield of new flesh only served to give an impression of serenity. She had even managed to remain composed the day she heard, along with the other villagers, about Mansukh the policeman's murder at the hands of Devi. When Papu's eye lingered on her, she confronted him as she did every other morning, with a wide, tender smile. Still, she waited another month before acting on it.

One February morning when she left the village after her uncle had gone down to the river, she seemed so gentle that the neighbours to whom she handed over her two daughters swallowed everything she said; that her sister, who lived in Etawah was on the point of having a baby, and that she needed her to look after the house.

But there hadn't been anything suspicious about it. Kusumana left walking regally, submissively draped in her widow's veils, heavy and ceremonious, as she normally did. She took her time, her hands were empty and she wasn't armed. Or rather, she carried along with her an invisible arsenal: the sombre cast of words, in which the poisonous germs of revenge like to hatch.

## *36*

She had calculated and weighed everything up. The tone of voice, the remarks, even the silences. In order to achieve her aim, she knew her hatred had to be expressed indirectly. The only way to do this was through the Singh brothers.

Since their arrest, two years ago they were locked up in prison in Etawah. The most difficult thing for Kusumana was to gain entry into the visitor's room of the prison. But, here too, she found a way out. She pretended to be the sister-in-law of Lalaram, the more pleasant of the two brothers, the one who was nicknamed Tool Box because of the enormous size of his genitals. She claimed her husband had died the previous month, and she asked to have five minutes with her brother-in-law. She put on a weary air, pulling her white sari over her face. As she spoke, she passed her hand over her stomach several times as though calming some rebellious pain.

They took her word for it and permitted her a meeting in the visitor's room that same afternoon.

Kusumana was very clever. The session turned out to be much better than she thought it would, but that didn't mean, however, that she had won. She summoned up all her energy

and the subtleties of her cunning; she knew how to confuse truth and lies like no one else. In fact, a lot of what she said was the truth. She told the two brothers, without altering a word, about the rumour she had heard concerning Babu's death, the rise of Vikram, the murder of the policeman Mansukh by Devi. She did, however, distort the story with imperceptible touches of pure invention: white lies, masterpieces, introduced from time to time quite innocently like some weavers who enjoy threading a precious yarn through a banal fabric, a way of attracting attention to it at a lower cost. For example she told the Singh brothers that Vikram had plotted their downfall for months beforehand. Or she whispered, in the course of another sentence, that he had assumed the same nickname as theirs, the Valley Butcher, now that he headed the gang. Just at the end of her tale, she muttered that Vikram shared his power equally with Devi and added—her voice broken and head lowered, looking for forgiveness before she had even started—that now and again he allowed her to command the men. 'Men that were once yours, that you armed and fed .... They are now in the hands of a whore... a tart that never stops telling them that you are nothing but cowards, because you chose to be taken off to prison when you were arrested, rather than have your brains blown out like all the great bandits do....'

Just then, a long silence descended on the room. Sri Ram said to Kusumana in a low voice: 'Finish...' placing his hand on his brother's arm who was by now beginning to foam with anger. 'Finish,' he repeated. 'Tell us everything.' Kusumana cast down her eyes. 'There isn't really much else to add,' she murmured. Then she sighed: 'It is a great tragedy. This girl, a slut.... They are well matched, her and Vikram.... to think they took your place from you, you who are warriors, Thakurs....'

That is when the Singh brothers saw red. They gripped the wire netting that separated them from Kusumana and spat out a stream of insults. Predictably, Lalaram bawled the loudest. The policeman woke up, and Kusumana panicked for just a second. But she pulled herself together quickly. She decided to burst into tears, a move which had the desired effect: the two brothers

immediately stopped cursing. So she whimpered: 'I am only a poor widow, I have no more family. You are all I have left in the world. What am I going to do with my two daughters? I am not asking you for money, but you are my only chance.... Only you two left to love....'

The two brothers gave a slight grimace, which was a sign—a rare one—of the beginning of some feeling on their part. Kusumana thought the time had come for her to slip away. She bowed before them, barely touched their feet through the netting, and then cleared off—hunched over, for once, looking humble and light, hidden under her veils like a beggar.

The next day when she returned to the village, she had returned to her former splendour. They didn't expect to see her so soon. To the neighbours who were likely to ask questions, she explained detached and calmly, that her sister no longer needed her, as she had given birth two weeks before to a stillborn child. While speaking, she wore her large, gentle smile, as she always did. Everyone believed her. No one saw behind the facade a brief burst of black light, which was astonishingly like the enlarged eye of the devi on the poor quality calendars, or the temples paintings which show her returning from her deadly missions.

## *37*

Love, was a word the Singh brothers hadn't heard for ages. It was impossible to think that someone had said it to them at any point: no one had ever loved those two, probably not even their mother. They didn't care, they were twins. Nothing and nobody had ever succeeded in separating them. The bigger one, Lalaram, was stockier, more attractive, with his golden eyes, his beautiful clear skin, and his 'tool box,' always protruding under his jeans. The other, Sri Ram, or 'the Boss,' was the cleverer one. The uglier too, small and puny, with rotten teeth and skin pockmarked from variola; it was as if the disease had avenged itself for the fact that it had missed his brother, and so

concentrated all its purulence on him. All the same, Sri Ram was just as good a marksman as the handsome Lalaram, and he had a mind that was so twisted that some people didn't have the slightest hesitation in saying that he was a reincarnation of one of the demon Nagaraja, who had, many moons ago, ruled the Valley. This is where he got his surname from, because it was said that Lalaram didn't fire a shot without his brother's advice.

The truth, as you can imagine, was more subtle than that. Lalaram was violent, he flew into a rage for the slightest reason. When this occurred, Sri Ram was the only one who could control him if he couldn't be reasoned with. Since they had taken to the ravines—ten years earlier, at the age of fourteen, a record in the Valley—they had lost count of their forays and their deadly raids. They weren't even twenty years old when they had their own gang. The Singh brothers couldn't steal without killing. Blood and murder was as natural to them as the river to the fish. The police and the other bandits honoured them with the same title, 'the Valley Butchers', a nickname, in passing, that was quite barbed, because they were vegetarians. The mere idea that a morsel of meat could find its way into their food caused them to explode with an anger that was terrifying to witness.

It was above all the atrocities they committed that made them famous, apart from their speed in an attack. They were credited with having killed very young children, and it was said that they never failed to cut off the noses of women they had just raped. The police also charged them with one of the most savage murders ever committed in the Valley since Independence. During a raid on a village around Etawah, they had slit the throats of five peasants under the pretext that they had betrayed them; then they carved up the dead bodies.

Fearing reprisals, those who had witnessed the crime didn't dare to come out and accuse the Singh brothers. Or else they withdrew their statements when it came to signing a bona fide deposition. Because of a lack of evidence, the twins avoided legal proceedings for a long spell.

Sri Ram, alias the Guru, was inevitably blamed for these

sinister attacks. He was thought to be the one who dealt with the Black Lady, and they maintained that his twin was only an accomplice, an indispensable aspect of his base requirements, whereas he dedicated himself to the most essential part: conspiracies and sacrifices destined to win over, in every situation, the inspiration and the favours of the Elusive Goddess.

As they were incredibly swift, a rumour was afloat that they were in fact protected by a mysterious force which rendered them superhuman, elusive, omnipresent, on every count identical to Kali. The legend was quickly substantiated by the little temple that the Singh brothers built with a part of their gains in Kali, just below Behmai their birthplace, opposite Sheikhpur Gura. They wanted to adorn it with all the delights of modern comfort: tap-water, enormous prints, and an extensive veneer of multi-coloured earthenware around her statue. The twins also installed in the entrance to the sanctuary, what was to become its main attraction: an automatic dispenser of perfumed water and arrack. The machine was red and black, as was the Goddess' face. She had been bought in Gwalior for a large sum. In the past, she had dispensed tea and lemonade. As soon as the huge levers were lightly brushed, she jumped, started clattering and chugging frenetically, giving the impression that she was going to fall to the ground at any moment, into a heap of metal. She finally calmed down, however, coolly spitting out her liquid, but not without spilling every now and again the syrupy alcohol into the rose oil and vice versa. No one ever took offence. As soon as it was put into service, the machine was the irrefutable proof for the Thakurs of Behmai that the twins—in a former life, perhaps in another world, who knows what goes on, on the other side—had made special agreements with Kali.

The police in the ravines almost believed all the popular stories about the bandits. On the other hand, the senior civil servants of Kanpur, together with those of Gwalior and Agra, brought up in the tradition of English education, stressing cold logic, opted for a different explanation. During regular meetings, for coordinating their efforts they failed to arrive at a common consensus with the three States that crossed the Valley on the

phenomenon of bandits. They indulged in lengthy speculation about criminal characteristics. Before moving on to more serious matters,--to decide whether or not to hunt down the bandits by freeing hordes of starving tigers or by razing the ravines with a bulldozer, in other words by drowning them thanks to the reserve dams on the river—they simply amused themselves by considering a few elegant theories. They didn't try to hide their partiality for the bizarre file on the Singh brothers. To quote a favourite word of theirs, it was the most colourful. And quite appropriate, as it happens; because to compensate for the absence of witnesses and proof, the police had crammed it with vivid descriptions, staggering tales of ambushes and assaults, which were, clearly for the greater part, a pure figment of the imagination. Certainly, the frequent references of the two brothers' prayers to the devi unsettled the minds of these senior bureaucrats, who put on a show of taking the cult of Kali for superstition from another era. One day the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh presented the Singh brothers as being 'an obvious examples of an active dual personality'. On another occasion, his counterpart in Rajasthan whipped up on this very subject, a brilliant thesis which he later developed into an article for a learned magazine, titled 'Murder and Dichotomy: the dominated and the domineered in the case of criminal twin-births.' Sri Ram was portrayed as a genius of limitless inventiveness, with Lalaram as a naive tool at the mercy of his brother's destructive vacuity. The minister had not quite grasped the real meaning of 'Tool Box,' either out of simplicity or crass ignorance of the bandits world. He thought it referred 'in symbolic form' as he put it, to the 'external, mental appendix of the dominant twin, the muscular, obedient and servile outfit, that allowed the criminal to proceed in crime without any feelings of guilt.'

The minister was only aware of his mistake several months later, when the Singh brothers were arrested. For it was the extremely well-known 'Tool Box' that brought them down one day at the end of August 1978, in circumstances that were far from glorious. Each year, at the beginning of the monsoon, to celebrate the end of the raids the twins went to a madame from

Etawah who was reputed to have the most beautiful girls in the Valley. Under no circumstances did the Singh brothers miss their time-honoured practice. Perhaps, it was the fatigue after a particularly difficult season, but Lalaram noticed this year that his showy 'Tool Box' remained, despite all his efforts, stubbornly ineffectual and he pushed the girl away, and collapsed in tears into his brother's arms. After a day's thought, he decided to bring him into the heart of the jungle where he subjected the declining 'Tool Box' to a thorough examination by a Baba and his friends, trained, it was said, in the great mysteries of Shiva, Master of Snakes and all that resembled His Majestic Tail in this underworld. After three weeks of extremely rigorous fasting and severe flagellation, Lalaram acquired once more, thanks to the forgiveness of the god, the use of his precious extremity.

Back at the brothel, as the girl was not free Lalaram immediately flew into a rage. The next minute he knocked out the owner and two of her servants. A ruckus ensued, and one of the client, a policeman, thought he recognised them. He later maintained that Lalaram had been naked and that he had spotted him because of his legendary paraphernalia, the version that all the newspapers carried, but which was hotly denied by the Singh brothers. Whatever the case may be, they had been caught in the most degrading situation imaginable, in bed, less than half an hour later, by fifteen policemen who broke into the room where their beloved, under the attentive gaze of Sri Ram, was desperately trying to quash the passions of a Tool Box which had livened up beyond all belief.

Sri Ram's rage was very bizarre. For ten days in a row, he paced up and down the ten square metres of his cell, his brow furrowed in anxiety. From time to time he collapsed onto the floor as if he had been struck by lightening. He could stay prostrate for an entire day. Then, out of the blue, he stood up again and resumed his furious pacing.

It must be underlined that he was not destined to madness, for a sudden turn of events in March 1980, meant that just at the right moment, he was plucked from his delirious state. The elections were approaching. Judge Shankar, a Harijan from

Lucknow, had never succeeded in being transferred. For eighteen months, despite all the insults the twins heaped on him throughout their interrogation, he hounded them with questions. He still hadn't wheedled one confession out of them.

Thinking all was lost, he played his last card. Fifteen days before the beginning of the electoral campaign, half terrified of the men in his custody, and half hoping that he would see at last, arriving on his desk, an envelope embossed with an emblem, from the minister announcing his transfer, Judge Shankar proposed verbally to his superior—a Thakur—to free Lalaram and Sri Ram. He implied that the decision was entirely at his discretion. On the 15 March 1980, without further ado, Judge Shankar threw in the towel and signed the official form which restored full and complete liberty to the Singh brothers, due to a lack of evidence.



It was around about the same time that the unforgettable attack on the village of Guffiakhar close to Etawah took place. The culprits charged in the police report were members of, what was still called—but not for much longer—Vikram Mallah's band.

The village of Guffiakhar was well-off, built on a spot which itself attracted looting, at the bottom of a corrie driven through with narrow transverse valleys. Vikram's scouts, who had come here several times to check the place out, had been heartened by some excellent omens. The evening of the attack, the peasants who had been taken off-guard, offered no resistance. It was only towards the end that the whole business went awry. The bandits were finishing up their raid, when a police patrol emerged from one of the gorges. Vikram, stationed on a roof with Devi by his side, was surveying the wide open spaces and the river. The waning sun had gradually clouded the horizon in a halo of red dust, and he wasn't aware of their approach.

Nevertheless, he was the quickest one off his mark. He ordered them to open fire at the first uniform he saw, without

troubling himself to find out if it was another band or a policeman. The confrontation was brief but bloody: three policemen died. The gang, by some miracle, didn't lose any of its men. As the band withdrew into the ravines, Vikram couldn't help doing something that surprised the more courageous of his companions. He sprang onto a ridge, brandishing a loudspeaker, and shouted a number of times: 'This is the work of the rebel Devi! Long live Devi, the Bandit Queen! Long live Putli Bai, Long live Devi!'

Echoing right around the semi-circle shaped by the cliffs, Devi's name resounded unremittingly in the ears of the villagers, still grouped around the corpses of the victims.

It seemed that thirty years after her death, the Lady of the Ravine had come to life in the form of the violent and highly-strung little peasant from Sheikhpur Gura.

This is exactly what worried the senior civil servants of Kanpur a few days later, when they started to sift through the local police reports on the attack of Guffiakhar, which had caused a sensation in the press. Whether they were peasants or policemen, all the witnesses affirmed that they had seen the new Bandit Queen with their own eyes. But as soon as they were asked for a more detailed description—age, stature, approximate height, skin colour, or even the smallest distinguishing mark, a tatoo or a scar—, the answers were always the same and all as confused. 'She is very beautiful.' They all let slip a remark which they reckoned would lead to her identification quite easily: 'She was as beautiful as a girl in a movie.'

For one entire week, the dignified and efficient Mr. Mahendra, Inspector General of the Kanpur Police, was lost wondering as to the exact meaning of this last statement. Since he had been appointed to this position—in charge of crime in the ravines—Mr. Mahendra had hardly been to the cinema at all. When he wanted to take his mind off the infernal redtape of law proceedings and reports that filled his days, he went to explore the jungles north of the city, a volume of Archeological Survey in his hand, to search for lost cities. He dreamed of proving one day that the kingdom of Nagas conjured up in the

epic of Mahabharata was not merely a poetic invention. According to him, snake-worshipping dynasties had actually ruled the country thousands of years earlier than that, before the arrival of the invading Aryans. They were the ones, he claimed, that passed on their traditions in witchcraft to the local tribes. In order to prove this, as Schliemann did in Mycenae or Troy, he wanted to unearth their sanctuaries and towns. After fifteen years spent in systematically going through the jungles during his days off, Mahendra eventually excavated a number of sanctuaries in fallow land, which, although only five or six centuries old, earned him praise in a short piece in the archeological bulletin. In view of his position and in return for a few bribes, he managed to keep a few of these findings for himself—portions of friezes and some statues that were hardly damaged at all—which now decorated the lawn of his beautiful Georgian house, and the four corners of the rose flower-beds.

Notwithstanding the passion for what he sometimes called, with a hint of emotion in his voice, the 'Indian Atlantis,' Mahendra was generally described as a cold, practical man. It must be said that since Independence, there hadn't been a police Inspector General in Kanpur who had been so concerned about facts. He believed that imagination was the definitive enemy of a policeman, 'more devastating than the most violent gangsters, he repeated to his auxiliaries, and more fickle than the most Machiavellian of murderers.' Although in his mid-fifties, his pernickety fervour hadn't weakened. He checked everything, ordered his men to confirm the slightest evidence, demanded reconstitutions and photographs. One of the more original points of the training he gave to his subordinates referred to statement analysis. The unanimity of statements as far as he was concerned, was often only a smoke-screen. He asserted that he had never seen these statements correspond exactly. It was often there, in the chink, the minute discrepancy that separated them, that lay the key to the truth.

That is precisely what was so irritating about the Guffiakhar business: there wasn't the slightest discrepancy in their statements. Only the leitmotif of the presence, within the gang,

of a film beauty. No woman bandit since Putli's death had been conceited enough to claim to be her successor. To top it all, that this spectacular announcement should come from the man who had taught her the trade, Vikram Mallah, was something the Valley had never witnessed before. So for one week, the calm convictions of Mr. Mahendra were severely tried. Every evening after his subordinates had left, he once again took out the reports on the Guffiakhar affair and went over them with a fine-tooth comb late into the night. But although he read them again and again, apart from the identity of the dead policemen and an inventory of stolen objects, all he could find was some kind of poetic vagueness. For example, not one of the statements indicated which cinema star the assumed new Bandit Queen looked like. What they did know took up three lines. They gave her name: Phoolan Devi, daughter of Devidin Mallah, from Sheikhpur Gura.

What was really the last straw during that week, and served only to exacerbate the annoyance of the respectable Mr. Mahendra, was that after twenty years as a police officer, he still didn't know what exactly a filmstar beauty looked like, despite his travelling past multi-coloured posters of them each day. Strangely, it was in this sombre cave, of the cinema that he had experienced his first feelings of love. Around the age of twelve, ten times in a row he went to see the same film, only for the part in which the heroine was thrown into the river and revealed her explicit yet tender figure under her damp sari.

The heatwave arrived early that year, which exasperated Mahendra even more. It is undoubtedly the reason why, at the end of this gruelling week, he went so far as to investigate something, that the mere thought of the day before had lifted his spirits. To find out the real truth, he consulted cinema magazines that women pick up. He did this by night when he came home from the office, although not before verifying that Mrs. Mahendra was fast asleep. He was so terrified of being caught out by her that he returned umpteen times to her bedroom and listened in the dim light for the snores that lifted her mosquito net up and down at regular intervals.

This passion for the cinema was the only real cause of disagreement between this outwardly placid couple. Mahendra was pragmatic enough to admit that married life was a pact of mutual politeness, which hid silent knowledge of overwhelming differences of opinion. As a result, when his wife admitted a weakness for the famous actor Ramachandran soon after their engagement, it was enough for him then to gently tease her, though secretly he detested him. However, years after this admission, when one day Mahendra surprised his wife with this, her forehead wrinkled and her mouth set in a hard prognathic grimace. She hastily arranged for a ticket on the black market, for five times its price. It wasn't this fact that troubled the Inspector General, nor even the slight idea he had acquired of his wife's romantic secrets. What disgusted him beyond words was to see her expression of passionate greed. The mere sight of a ticket, transformed her normally smooth and placid face.

When he had finished flicking through his magazines that night, the same revulsion seized him. With only a few exceptions, the heavily made-up plump beauties that filled every page were no different from the ones who had so perturbed him in his youth. How was it possible to imagine the scene described by the people of Guffiakhar, of one of these ample young women with a Mauser on her shoulder, jumping from one roof to another, from one ravine to the next. These girls didn't bring to mind a cat-like agility, any more than Mrs. Mahendra did.

The respectable Mr. Mahendra had a very bad night. Totally shameless he put away his wife's magazines, and mulled over the same arguments once more; the peasants' statements were beyond his comprehension, unless he assumed that this woman bandit was a girl from the town—a big town, like Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta. However, all the police reports confirmed that she had never once left the boundaries of the ravines, she had been born near Kalpi, in Sheikhpur Gura, a tiny market town—an isolated spot. It was either one or the other: either the people of Guffiakhar were victims of collective hallucination—this had been known to happen in small villages deep in the countryside, where they were obsessed by tales of spirits and witches—or he had to

go along with the existence of a new Bandit Queen. The mere idea of resurrecting the Bandit Queen was unbearable. Firstly, because of the effect she would have on the fanciful and corrupt minds of the journalists. But above all, because it concerned a woman. That same night, Mahendra had to face certain realities; he never really knew how to deal with women.

To pass the time, he went into his garden, and wandered a while between his old statues that had been torn from the jungle. It was here, by a connection of ideas he would rather not explain, that he took a decision he later thought was particularly heroic. He decided to divulge his anxieties to his subordinate Mr. Jain, Deputy Inspector General—as respectable as he himself was, although far less competent—during the course of the get together he usually hosted for the town's high society on the last Saturday of every month, in his beautiful Georgian bungalow.



'It is quite simple,' Jain confided. 'That evening the Guffiakhar affair was the only subject of discussion, besides the girl, as Mahendra called her. He couldn't bring herself to say her name'

Jain was particularly struck by that evening at the end of March, for Mr. Mahendra was a man of habit. However, that evening he bent several rules of his ritual. Normally, by an understanding, the origins of which neither one of them ever questioned, these evenings always proceeded in the same manner. Jain arrived half an hour before the other guests, accompanied by his wife. He would, together with Mahendra, sit down on the rattan chairs under the colonnade of the veranda. In winter, when the evenings were cold, they retreated into the sitting-room, in front of a fireplace installed by the English during the Raj. Then the servants brought them two glasses of lime cordial. They drank a few mouthfuls, and then in the most casual way imaginable, they took stock of investigations that were presently underway. It was always Jain who began the conversation.

Far from being excessively reserved, like his superior, Jain was direct and garrulous. Just after two sentences, Mahendra would guess which file was on his mind. Jain didn't possess the elegance of the Inspector General either. Whereas one was tall, terse, and stiff with the pride of his superior caste, the other appeared to worry about disappearing into the numerous curves of his little, podgy body. His very skin, black and greasy and his permanent smile, all served to remind him of the shopkeepers at the bazaar. Like them, he had a reedy voice and he was a smooth talker, capable of announcing the worst kind of atrocities without losing his lifeless tranquility. Mahendra enjoyed this. When Jain irritated him, he interrupted him with a simple wave of his hand, which of course revealed within a matter of seconds the arrogance of his origins.

It was very humid that night, Jain remembers. Was it the heat that night that dulled Jain and on the contrary made Mahendra jumpy? Unlike during the last five years of this Saturday ritual, it was the Inspector General who spoke first:

'Do you know what the girl in Guffiakhar looks like?'

Jain had just sat down, he hadn't even had the time to pick up his glass. The unexpected nature of this opening made him hit his elbow off the crystal, and the ice-cubes clinked against its fragile rim. At that very moment, the fan which had been attempting to keep the heat at bay, gave a long chug, then suddenly started up again with a throbbing sound that blotted out all the night sounds. Nevertheless, Jain had guessed what Mahendra was going to say when he resumed:

'Did you read the reports? This girl...'

His voice petered out..Jain crouched further back into his folds of fat and stammered:

'All...all the statements tally.'

'You know full well what I think about statements that tally.'

Mahendra had regained his severe expression. Jain allowed him to continue:

'This evidence is a web of triviality. Did you read it properly? A new Bandit Queen, a girl who is supposed to look like a film star.... a film star in this backwater!'

There was a long moment of silence. Then Mahendra let it drop, as though the discussion was already over:

'Anyway, the people from there have never set foot inside a cinema. They never leave their homes.'

Jain gave a wide smile as he always did when he was about to contradict Mahendra.

'There are cinema magazines floating around everywhere. Even in the ravines.'

'Come on now!' Mahendra cut in, and began once more to stare at the gate. However, Jain continued self-possessed:

'Those people are like everyone else. The photos in the magazines allow them to dream. Just the names of these reviews: Star Dust, Star in Style...'

'Do you read them?'

'Everybody is familiar with them; everybody has seen at least once in their lifetime one of these girls who...'

'Everybody, nobody... You know as well as I do that the people in the ravines are not just anybody or everybody!'

Mahendra was waving his hand again, but this time in the direction of the interior of the villa, more accurately towards his library:

'If they were like everybody else, we wouldn't have sent sociologists to observe them for months on end, and I wouldn't have a shelf bursting with studies on them.'

Mahendra straightened himself up against the back of his armchair, a move that made him look even more tense. Jain was carried away; then he gathered himself once again, taking the risk to say defiantly:

'The policemen who were in Guffiakhar also read these magazines. Perhaps, they were the ones who encouraged the idea that...'

Mahendra was drumming on the table, a sure sign of downright distrust. Jain tried to find another way:

'We have no photograph of her. After all, she only ever ...'

'You know that we never have photographs of them until they are dead. A photo of her..'

Mahendra always said that when he spoke of the bandits. But

now that he was forced to say her it was all too much; his voice couldn't pronounce it and he had to break off the conversation before continuing in his usual even tone:

'These photos, they recall the time when the English were here, when there were big tiger hunts. Our humble local leaders composed scenes of the hunt in order to please their underlings who were lucky enough not to die when they were attacked.'

'The only thing is, are they beautiful, these film stars...'

Mahendra was muttering to himself, it wasn't really a question. For the first time in his life, Jain thought he was about to confide in him. He waited a while. Then decided to go on the offensive once more.

'You know how it is in the villages. If one peasant sets a story in motion the others will repeat it. They like repeating what they want to believe.... It so happens that this girl.... After all maybe she is just a kid who runs quickly and wears jeans.'

Jain didn't let go:

'The reports are confirmed, Mr. Mahendra. There is a girl in Vikram Mallah's band. We are positive of that since....'

'I know.'

'The people of Guffiakhar even said it was the new Putli Bai....'

'You didn't read it properly, Jain. This statement was made by the leader of the gang, just after the attack. He took his loudspeaker, and shouted whatever came into his head. Naturally, it went straight to the heads of the people down there, including the policemen, and you can see why with three men laid out.... You know their methods: a man who kills another is a murderer; if he kills ten, he becomes a hero. But my own job suggests that there should no longer be any heroes in the ravines: No stars, no goddamn justiciary!'

Mahendra's annoyance had reached its apogee, for it was rare for him to speak for such a long time; he also made a gesture that Jain had never seen before: he grabbed a stone off the ground, and flung it right into the centre of his flower-beds with the statues. This motion even astonished the servants, who were startled for a while. Then they resumed their comings and goings

with complete indifference between the garden and the veranda. Before the sparks, their silhouettes draped in white cotton took on an amber hue; they lost all their heaviness, which gave the impression that they were going to topple into an illusory world.

It may have been the reason why Mahendra calmed down. He even felt obliged to go back on his words and continue with a hint of a smile:

'Maybe she never did exist, this girl. In our country it has always been like that, since the beginning of time. We take a form, an idea, vague images, inconsistent dreams, we mix them, let them rest and ferment. Each time we end up with gods. Gods in their thousands, in their tens of thousands. Maybe millions of them. We never count them.'

Once more he had become the great Mahendra, his back straight in his armchair, cultivated and methodical, refined and distant, ready to escape into his dreams of Indian Atlantis.
He stood up. It signalled the end of the meeting. The servants brought the trolley of food closer. The smell of curry spread throughout the garden.

Regardless of this, Jain chose to launch a second offensive. One of the reports had a small detail that Mahendra had refused to bring up. It was the one that he had thought Mahendra was going to tackle him about that evening, instead of harping on about the villager's claptrap. There were two possibilities. Either Mahendra judged this detail to be of secondary importance, which greatly surprised him, or he hadn't noticed it. In both cases, the mere mention of it was going to irritate him. Maybe even humiliate him.

But he took the risk anyway. In an airy voice he uttered:

'There is, all the same, just one detail concerning the girl. A policeman says that he wounded her.'

'Wounded her?'

Mahendra turned around sharply towards the table:

'Which report? On which date? Have you just received it?'

'I thought that you...'

'Maybe,' Mahendra growled. 'Yes, of course... Wounded...'

Jain felt it was his duty to get him out of this fix.

'Yes, in the thigh. But you probably noticed too that in another statement... A different policeman said she had been hit in the stomach...'

Mahendra sat down again. He ran his fingers through his greying hair. The roots were slightly damp with perspiration and his fingers were trembling. Jain thought it was time to cut the conversation short.

'We will find her in the end. Beautiful and wounded: it would be difficult to miss her.'

Mahendra didn't answer. He abruptly rose to his feet, turned on his heel and left, locking himself in his library.

Whenever he recalled the scene several months later, Jain ended by saying, 'The idea that a woman could claim to take the place of Putli Bai was what brought on this miracle. Mahendra lost all his legendary precision. He hadn't even noticed the policemen's statement which declared that the girl had been hurt. I know what he did when he locked himself into his library, I found out the following Monday, as soon as I arrived at my office. He had, there and then, ordered enquires to be made at all the hospitals in the district. When he came back to the veranda, he had regained his customary calm and distinction. My wife had already arrived. She is a sharp one; she wasn't fooled. When we got home after the reception, she asked, 'What was wrong with Mahendra tonight? He didn't even talk about lost cities...?'

## *40*

'The body is nothing but writing on water,' the Guru told Devi when he had bestowed on her the Knowledge of Kundalini Shakti and had taught her to despise the flesh. However, she remembers the first time the painful truth dawned on her, always by the images of fire that kept emerging, as if the fever that consumed her body, sprung from nothing other than the provocation of a greater fire, which choked the plains too, early in the season.

She succeeded in getting herself admitted to the hospital in Gwalior, where no one would suspect she had come from the ravines. She felt very proud of herself. In fact, all the credit was due to Vikram. He had proved to be extremely careful. By bringing Devi to Gwalior, he had obeyed the first rule laid down for gang leaders: never to have a sick person treated in the same region, where an attack had taken place; to cross the border of the State, no matter how high the price to be paid. He chose Gwalior on the southern highway because he had liked the place since he had discovered it a few years ago when he had bought himself his first gun from a dealer connected with the Singh brothers gang. It was the only town that reminded him of the gorges. A fort overlooked it, on top of a long plateau. Enormous grottoes were cut into its sides and dozens of colossal statues, sculpted on pale stone.

Even in the plains, in the heart of the bazaar, at the end of the tangled mass of streets, in the courtyards, even in the boutiques and the backs of shops where the shadiest dealings of the Valley were carried on Vikram saw something of the gorges. Maybe it was the fact that one could lose the way so easily. Or the narrowness of the alleys. His arms dealer was to be found in one of these nauseating passages. Naturally, Vikram brought Devi, hidden under a tarpaulin in a bullock cart to be examined by the bandits' doctor.

No one knows exactly why she was operated on. Devi spoke on many occasions of a fibroma. Other times, she suggested that she had been wounded in the lower stomach during a raid, without mentioning either the place or the circumstances. In any case, Vikram was certain that her wound or her illness was far from serious. Instead of treating her there, as he frequently did, on the ground and under a makeshift anaesthetic, the doctor had preferred to admit her to the central hospital, despite an enormous bribe required to buy the silence of the nurses. For Devi, Vikram didn't skimp. He wanted the hospital. Nothing else would do. He put a price on it: that of a Mauser—the exact sum needed to save her,—that her cousin Mayadin had given him to kill her. It was undoubtedly Vikram too, who chose the

strange first name under which Devi appears in the hospital's register; Gudiya or Doll.

But the doctor didn't want to have her hanging around, and discharged her very quickly. Two days later, when they were about to take the road for the gorges again, she was struck down by a violent fever. They called back the doctor. He left behind a few tablets, but the fever refused to subside. In fact, it wasn't quite a fever. More precisely it took the form of brief, fiery bursts that erupted without warning and subsided in the same manner. They stayed in Gwalior for another week. To help pass the time, Vikram took Devi to the cinema. That was how she came to see the film Sholay that certainly left an impression on her for life, the title matching her pain admirably.

At least ten times she must have seen this endless story of murder and revenge. And she repeatedly added that she would have given anything to see it once more. The two heroes were prisoners on the run. One of them ended up finding perfect love with an ordinary girl, formerly bullied by hordes of dreadful bandits. There was also a more tragic figure who had dearly paid for the fact that he was both a policeman and a Thakur: all those closest to him, men, women, children, had been shot down with a machine-gun at the bottom of a corrie of mountains. He himself had lost both his arms. Right in the midst of this brutal hatred, the film also depicted an impossible love story between a widow who was silently grieving, and a happy, frivolous hero, suddenly overcome by passion.

It was becoming increasingly hot in the plains of Gwalior, and Devi's fever had still not subsided. Above the scorched town, the fort eventually assumed the glow of incandescent iron. The story of the movie was just as disquieting, but Devi wanted to return every morning. She never tired of it; turmoil had possessed her and taken hold; her stomach burnt, her mind ran riot even more. In the depths of the forest, the Guru had predicted all this for her: if the Mahashakti, Great Force, was going to possess and inhabit her, it would be in the form of fire under the sun, any sun.

It was also during this week that Devi got into the habit of

wearing her hair under a large red head-band. It was very wide and almost entirely covered her forehead. Vikram hated this hair-style. He told her so straight out. She wouldn't give in, and argued: 'I sweat all the time. So he dropped the subject. When the fever subsided and they returned the roads in the gorges, the red band had become a fixture. It was almost as if it were now impossible to advance without signalling the fact that she was consumed within by a flame that made her stand out from all others, and even she herself could not decide whether it was the desire to hate or the thirst to love.

## *41*

They crossed the northern border without any difficulty. When they entered the Etawah gorges, the ground was fractured almost everywhere. The earth was suffering; between the tufts of colourless grass, the only thing that was left were some shrubs choked with dust. From time to time the wind lifted, engulfing the ravines in powdery clouds.

The day before Vikram and Devi caught up with the band, they stopped in a nearby village to sleep. The peasant who had put them up came to wake them up long before daybreak. 'The police', he mumbled. 'The cops are around. They have been wandering about for quite a while now.' With this he pointed to the river. Vikram thought it would be wiser to leave post-haste. Remaining in the shadows, he took the ravine roads once again. He now walked ahead of Devi in large strides rather than beside her, regardless of the heat. And he kept his head thrust into his shoulders, as though trying to prevent a single thought from escaping.

Devi had known for a long time now that there was nothing hopeful in the silence of others; nothing but a little bitterness, difficult moments to bear. So she kept quiet and patiently swallowed her pain. It lasted until the evening, until they met up with the gang once again at the bottom of a gorge, in the same campsite, a hunting lodge, they had left before she fell ill.

Nothing seemed to have changed since the evening they had left, it was the same hour of the day, and the men still had the same habits: under a portico blackened by the monsoon, they heated up something to eat.

The first one to see them arrive was Lukka, who was stationed at the entrance of the transverse valley. He saluted them without a word, then brought them to the ruins of the hunting lodge. The men immediately noticed Vikram's perturbed state; there were none of the questions, none of the gestures or cheers that always marked the return of a gang leader. Everyone took refuge in the moment that followed; and the moment was meal-time, the fleeting joy of a glass of tea or a plateful of dal.

Devi followed the example of the others without a murmur, crouched near the stoves on which the pots were boiling. Only Lukka kept his distance. At the same time, he didn't take up his place again at the entrance to the gorges. At the top of a flight of half-crumbling steps, oblivious to the aromas of the food, he was examining Vikram, an avaricious look on his face. The men pretended to be indifferent; but at the same time they couldn't help furtively glancing at him, waiting for the cutting words he seemed to be on the verge of pronouncing.

They hadn't taken Vikram's swiftness into consideration. From where she was sitting, watching over the stove, she heard him growl:

'We will have to find allies. Merge with another band. The police are everywhere. We can no longer operate alone. We are going to have to...'

When he came to the end of this sentence, his voice became incomprehensible. Nonetheless, he was still swaggering, lifting his gaze towards the peaks of the gorges and the last rays of sun. But Lukka refused to be taken in. He came down the steps, and planted himself in front of him:

'A merger is always a dangerous thing, Vikram Mallah. The gods saw no reason to place two heads on a snake when they wanted to make him stronger. They simply added a little venom.'

'What do you mean? That we need new weapons? Do you have some money left to make us a gift of them?'

Vikram's annoyance had no impact on Lukka.

'You are a bandit, you know how to steal. Money as well as other things.'

'I have just crossed the entire Valley. The heatwave has come early; the lofts are already almost empty. If the peasants are hungry; we also will be hungry. It is too late to attack. We will have to find another way. Especially with all the cops that ...'

'When you are strong, it is never too late for anything. I thought you were aware of that. Time can be defeated in the same way as men can be. And at least it doesn't betray.

'There will be no treason if I join up with Mustaqeen.' On hearing Mustaqeen's name, the men flinched; some of them even put down their bowls and approached Vikram, half surprised, half anxious. As for Lukka, he had completely lost his composure and was repeating Mustaqeen's name in a dull voice. He pulled himself together quickly, as was his habit. Then continued, in a voice that was crisper than ever:

'Have you already seen him? Have you agreed to the merger?'

'I am going to find him. It is just a question of a few days.'

'Mustaqeen isn't a well-known bandit.'

'You are getting old, Lukka. The world is changing, we can have plenty of money without bloodshed.'

'Mustaqeen doesn't like attacks. He prefers kidnappings. Lots of money, as you say. But no more courage. No more nobility. Nothing, except money!

Lukka hissed these last words; and then his pupils were steadfast again. Nevertheless, Vikram persisted:

'Precisely.'

'Are you turning into a coward, Vikram Mallah?'

'You cannot be a coward when you are hungry. You are cunning. Until the next harvest, food is going to be sold at exorbitant prices. Six months without eating, have you thought about that? And that is if the rains come.

Lukka didn't answer. He got up and went to sit at the other end of the portico, where he had set up his mattress and his kit. He released his machine-gun from his shoulder, put it on the ground, lifted off the cover of his accordion and gently

stroked the old leather. The men had congregated around the pots yet again. Bowls and metal goblets clinked off one another. In the shrubs that surrounded the spring, the stirring of crickets could also be heard; a noise that was too insistent, a silence that wasn't quite a silence. So, tired more of the moment than of himself, Vikram decided to go and join Lukka.

'I don't have the means to do it any other way, he said, sitting down beside him.'

Lukka jumped up there and then, fixing the sling of his rifle on his shoulder.

'Your reasoning isn't entirely false, he sighed in reply. It's true, the men need to fill their stomachs. But can two swords be put in the same sheath? Between you and Mustaqeen, who will be the leader? Have you given it a thought?'

'Mustaqeen is a wise man. His men call him Guru. True wise men...'

'A wise man may actually want to be leader. The Valley is full of people who say they are Gurus. You only have to...'

Vikram interrupted him instantaneously. He too stood up, raised his head again towards the peaks of the gorges, where the sun was now going down into a dusty fog, almost bistre in colour. Without glancing at Lukka he retorted:

'I know Mustaqeen. I know his worth. I also know my own.'

He didn't brag any further, his voice had once more found its extraordinary solemnity and he contemplated the ridge heights with a wry smile, the smile of an absent man who, in his imagination, has already left the valleys and the ravines; he was already discussing endlessly with the great Mustaqeen. He was so convinced of this, that Lukka preferred to leave noiselessly, in the direction of the transverse valley. Then he heard him repeat:

'I am going to make this merger. And when I have done it, your pockets will be so full, everyone's pockets, that you will come of your own free will and kiss my feet.'

# PART III

From the very beginning, Devi and Mustaqeen didn't get on with each other. It wasn't that they actually detested each other. It was for a completely different reason, one which nothing could be done about. As soon as he saw her appear by Vikram's side, with her jeans and red headband, Mustaqeen believed that Devi would bring them bad luck.

Devi can still see it all: it happened around midnight towards the end of April. As Vikram had befriended some ferrymen, who made a mental note of all those who passed through the river, he quickly discovered where Mustaqeen was camping. However, because of the police, they had to make a long detour to get to the small circular hollow on the mountain-side, where he was installed.

Mustaqeen was seated right in the middle of a plastic tarpaulin smoking a hookah. As Vikram and Devi moved closer to him, Mustaqeen turned his head to place his pipe on the canvas. As a result, Devi's first impression of him was his profile, precisely etched out against the flames. The only thing she noticed then was his nose. And there was the rub.

It must be said in Devi's defence that Mustaqeen's nose was something of a phenomenon : extremely aquiline, a little up turned something that was very rare in the region. It must also be said, in tribute to Mustaqeen, that he had imaginatively tried to detract attention from his outlandish snout and he had succeeded admirably, by growing the most beautiful moustache in the entire Valley. It was said that his mysterious powers over people and objects lay in the depths of this dark growth, oiled and brushed, hair after hair, twice a day. Moreover, the evening that Vikram informed his men that he had decided to unite with Mustaqeen, the only subject of conversation had been the famous whiskers. They had even quibbled about them. It was

young Attu who had started it all. He was one of the few in the gang who read and write English with such a passion that he kept a diary in it. In this he recorded, not only the income and expenses of the band, but all the events that occurred during the day. In his pedantic manner, Attu tried to prove that the very name of Mustaqeen was taken from the language of the former colonists: 'Mustaqeen, moustache,' he repeated several times delightedly. He persisted unrestrainedly in saying this word in English, in order to prove the subtlety of his pronunciation. To his absolute amazement, he only succeeded in arousing their anger. Mustaqeen, the bandits exclaimed, was a word that came from the plains in the North, and it meant the Inflexible One. Some of them actually remembered that he had chosen this name at the age of fifteen when he had tried his luck as a wrestler in the akharas, wrestling arenas of, Kanpur. The warriors name, according to them, had been well earned, for he had never lost a single match, and would perhaps have become the Indian champion if, one day, he hadn't had to flee into the ravines after stealing a jeep.

Faced with the uproar that ensued, and the sheer number of hecklers, Attu gave up his theory. Calm was restored, except for Devi, who had listened to the whole conversation in silence. As she had always found Vikram rather lacking in pilosity—the only small defect she had ever found—, she began, as everyone else in the band and in the Valley, to daydream about the mysterious powers that were hidden in the Great Mustaqeen's moustache.

But the minute she saw him, she knew that the only thing that mattered was his nose. And that was how it all began. Used to sensing danger from afar, his nose began to quiver, a twitching which naturally didn't escape Devi's attention, and confirmed that she had unearthed his weakness. She would have been better off looking elsewhere. Her particular strength wasn't her nose but her eye. Nonetheless, this time it was too late, war had been declared, the nose was pitched against the eye, the eye against the nose. So Devi reckoned that she ought to feign a retreat, which wasn't difficult to do, as the eyes can conceal themselves

whereas the nostrils cannot, except with the help of a bushy moustache. Nevertheless, this particular nose was incredibly swift: before she had as much as blinked, or started to move to hide herself behind Vikram—something she did since her marriage to him—Mustaqeen, growled at Vikram from his plastic canvas, 'Get this woman out of here, while we discuss, Vikram Mallah. Her look is far too bold.'

And with his graceful fingers, he drew before the flames, a sign which, although almost imperceptible, didn't escape any of the bandits: it was the five points of the star used to ward off spells.

## *43*

The bargaining between the two leaders lasted until daybreak, which was not long in Lukka's opinion, as he considered Mustaqeen to be a great quibbler. In fact, neither he nor Vikram were in the mood for haggling. Within a few days, the shortage of supplies would become critical. So Mustaqeen shared with Vikram, as indeed Vikram had hoped he would, his superior knowledge in the art of kidnapping. For his part, he offered Mustaqeen, reinforcements of men, and ammunition.

Mustaqeen's greatest weakness at this moment, when the police were continuously patrolling the ravines, was the size of his gang: just ten men. If the police decided to mount a huge attack, they wouldn't be safe anywhere. Keeping the hostages would become as perilous as the kidnappings themselves. Therefore, Vikram's offer came as a blessing in disguise. But he remained cautious: he decided to be with Vikram on only one case, the kidnapping of a rich Thakur. He had been spying on him for months on end, he knew everything there was to know about his wealth and his habits. Without consultation, he fixed a date for two days after.

According to Lukka, the agreement would have been reached sooner but for Vikram's intention to include the two Singh brothers into the gang, having just heard of their release. As

soon as their names were mentioned, Mustaqeen stiffened:

'That's your business. But never bring those two dogs into my gang. Never, not over my dead body!'

'They too are hungry,' Vikram coldly insisted.

'The sky gives the earth its rains. But the earth only returns dust to the sky.'

Even though he lived in the ravines, and his brow was furrowed by sleepless nights and from running about under the hot sun, Mustaqeen spoke with the calm air and the precision of a Guru. He chose appropriate words, his speech was slow, with effortless sentences, disembodied, not needing any human assistance. Never a tensed muscle, or the suggestion of a grimace, the moving lips only barely perceptible behind his moustache. Long silences punctuated his conversations. He prolonged this pause before beginning again:

'It's your life, Vikram Mallah. You are free to choose your friends, free to choose how to satisfy your hunger. You are free to give to whomsoever you like what you have on your plate. Even if you choose to feed a snake. As for me, I too am free to express the desire to die alone.'

Then he closed his eyes, signalling the end of the discussion, as if he had been preparing for famine and eventual death, for quite sometime now.

'I will come without them,' Vikram replied at once.' You are right, I will come without them.'

Mustaqeen didn't move.

'You change your mind very quickly,' Mustaqeen sighed. 'Normally, I always avoid men like you, whose minds turn as quickly as the wind. But you are hungry, and I feel sorry for you. Just this once, I agree to help you. Just this one time...'

In the end he opened his eyes; This was typical of Mustaqeen. With just a few words, he had turned the whole situation to his advantage, in the direction he desired, giving nothing, yielding nothing. And Lukka, still sitting behind Vikram, thought he could predict the next step: he was going to demand that Devi leave.

'But it was daybreak. Everyone was hungry. Vikram wasn't as long-winded as Mustaqeen. He spoke directly, which was one of his strong points. If he was setting his cap at Mustaqeen, it was because he was desperate and his men were starving. Before even arriving at his camp, he had ordered Devi to keep away from the discussions. Not because he had presumed Mustaqeen wouldn't like her but because he thought to himself that what he couldn't obtain through the mind, he would get through the stomach. He had therefore asked Devi to stay away in order to prepare a meal to seal the union.'

This is exactly what Devi did. She had brought everything in her backpack, vegetables, spices and most important of all salt, which, when mixed with food, renders a contract sacred. The meal was ready just before dawn, as Vikram had requested and as per his orders, she brought it to them when the sun rose.

This time she avoided looking at Mustaqeen's nose, and played up her boyish charms, her feminine movements being muted by men's clothes.

Then something happened that was unforeseen, the gift of the gods—or of their adverse influence, depending on how you look at it: a young frightened animal shot headlong out of the gorges, and cut across Devi's path at the very moment she was about to set the pot down between Vikram and Mustaqeen. It was a vulture, looking exhausted, running at full tilt, from right to left, an extremely rare omen of good fortune. Of that there was no question, the vulture had chosen Devi, had been so close as to brush her. She had been so frightened that she had almost dropped her dishes. Mustaqeen, who was about to speak,—perhaps even speak against her, drew before her once again, the five points of the star that wards off evil. He was left open-mouthed. Although she could have humiliated him, crushed him, countered the sign to wards off evil with a thousand other stars, and a thousand other mantras of anathema and loathing, Devi contented herself to place the pot between the two men.

A moment later, the deed was done, Mustaqeen had tasted the curry, shared his salt with Vikram; the union was sealed, a vow unto death.

## 44

The kidnapping planned took place two days after the agreement and went exactly according to plan. As usual, he had set his sights on a rich Thakur landowner. For weeks now, his informers had been watching every move of their victim and had made a list of even his tiniest quirks. Mustaqeen had noted them down in a small diary with the precision of a bureaucrat, then matched them to an approximate evaluation of the Thakur's belongings. After making this appraisal without conferring at any stage with his men he decided to kidnap him. Neither did he consult them when he revealed his plan, which was subsequently adopted without discussion. Vikram himself didn't react. He knew he needed to take Mustaqeen at face value: silent and solitary. That was certain. At a time when they ran the risk, from one day to the next, of no longer being able to satisfy their hunger, this kind of trust was priceless.

One evening in April, Mustaqeen's men surprised the wealthiest landowner in the Etawah region. On the outskirts of a gorge, a certain Thakur Vallah, was on his way to a temple where he was going to pray to Lakshmi, so that she would continue to grant him in these difficult times, all the benefits of prosperity. He was tied up in less than no time. They blindfolded him and took his fat, trembling bulk, to the ruins of the hunting lodge on the summit of Etawah.

Through all this, Vikram's men were guarding the exits of the surroundings ravines and were spreading fearful rumours in the Thakur's village in order to give its inhabitants a taste of what would happen if the family didn't hand over the ransom. Apparently, according to witnesses, Devi was among the first that morning to knock out the old men and pin the women against the wall, the barrel of her Mauser dug into their stomachs.

This she has always denied. The villagers didn't dare alert the police until well after the release of the hostage. They were so terrified that in the end this fear also spread to the police. To avoid patrolling Thakur country they used to make up the excuse that the roads there were infested with cobras. The heat, they

maintained, made them all the more aggressive; on several occasions the snakes had even tried to swing into the jeeps, perhaps one of the stories invented during the months of intense heat.

The only things that seemed to survive were the forces of destruction. The Goddess, for example. Or the snakes. And the bandits. Vikram and his men had dashed into the village like demons shooting out of the earth, armed with boundless violence. It was this very energy that drove Mustaqeen when negotiating with the Thakur family. In spite of the exorbitant ransom demanded, the relations of the hostage lost heart quickly. Hardly a week was up, when they agreed to pay two-thirds of it. For Mustaqeen was extremely harsh; and behind the words that he addressed to the family's envoy, Devi often felt something akin to belligerence. It momentarily ruffled the superb tranquility of his features especially when either the envoy or he himself had to pronounce the name of the Thakur. Nevertheless, there were, Thakurs in the gang, poverty-stricken Thakurs, miserable peasants who had been stripped of their land, more often than not by another Thakur, whom they had killed. They had then been obliged to flee the common injustice of the world into the bottom of chaos which was the ravines. Here since the time of Raju, the first Bandit King, lived every caste imaginable, a sombre fraternity of men clothed in dust. Just before setting out for the kidnapping, Mustaqeen honoured the tradition reminding them about Raju and repeated the legend. He quoted in addition, as he was empowered to, a few sentences referring to his own God, the Supreme Being of his book, the Koran, from which he was never separated. And without revealing any sense of disquiet, he pronounced the words justice and equality: the key which opened the gloomy labyrinth of the gorges to all the downtrodden. This prepared them, whether Thakurs or Mallahs, followers of gods with ten arms or zealots of a single and faceless God, for all the hunger and thirst, for every possible wild and extraordinary fate.

Nonetheless, the evening the march ended, Mustaqeen who had up until then been so distant with the Thakur's envoy,

couldn't help insulting him to in his face just as he brought his hand down on the wad of bank notes.

'Money of a dog! A Thakur dog!'

Throughout the bargaining, Devi hadn't taken her eyes off Mustaqeen's face. She was not surprised to see it twisted once again into an elusive and bitter scowl.



The ransom money allowed the two bands to hold out until the rains. At the same time it would not be sufficient, if the shortage happened to last beyond this time. So Vikram and Mustaqeen agreed to carry out two other kidnappings.

Mustaqeen attacked the Thakurs once again; the procedure for the kidnappings was exactly the same. As on the previous occasion, the families weren't reluctant to pay the ransom.

Of the two leaders, Vikram was the more excitable. As for Mustaqeen, he concealed his euphoria with moralistic declarations and the trappings of all his idiosyncrasies: the rigorous cleaning of his moustache, his never-ending meditations before smoking his hookah or having his glass filled with tea. Apart from the raids during which he proved to be extraordinarily fast, his slow, precise movements continued to engender a princely distance between him and his men, like a sacred barrier that no one dared to breach.

Only Vikram ventured to do so. He did this at the least expected moment, just after the third kidnapping and following the division of the loot.

At six o'clock, sharp Mustaqeen ceremoniously switched on his radio. No one took any notice. Wherever he was, Mustaqeen listened to his radio; even while he was walking, which ran contrary to the law of silence. If it weren't for the rifles and the machine-guns, the backpacks scattered all over the dry brush wood, the scene would appear to be like evening setting over the plains during the weeks that precede the rains: that of men taking refuge in the shade, weary of counting days, of searching

the sky, their minds overburdened, their brains numbed.

All that was missing in order to complete this picture was the sound of the flute which often rose from the villages at that hour of the day, as though encouraging the afternoon to end its reign. At the end of the news bulletin, the radio broadcast folk ballads. Far from their homes, this was what the men looked forward to, much more than the news itself. They all ached for shelter and sleep, and the music helped them as they waited for the coolness of the night to set in. Mustaqeen himself closed his eyes, a hand firmly around the glass of tea, as if he had turned on his transistor simply out of pure habit.

Then suddenly he put his glass down, his back stiffened, he looked up at the transistor as if listening to it with his nostrils. With this single gesture, Devi understood that he had been disturbed. Behind her, the young Attu, still scribbling his thoughts down in his private diary must have also see it, because he dropped it. In turn, Lukka also stiffened, then Kalla. Simultaneously, they turned their heads towards Mustaqeen, as did Baladin and Musketeer, his two young lieutenants, until then absorbed in cleaning their rifles.

Probably, the English word kidnapping coming right in the middle of this Hindi bulletin drew their attention. But it was when they saw Mustaqeen holding the radio close to his ear that they really grasped the fact that there was danger, real danger. All the sound, even the static, was lost to Mustaqeen's ear, and they couldn't hear anything anymore.

It didn't last long, half a minute, at most a minute. The news bulletin ended with some worthless information, the story of a stormy film production at the studios in Bombay, the announcement of a marriage in an old royal family, from the South. The news reader finished and the usual music played at the end of the day finally came through, gentle and languid, slowly rising along the length of the cliffs. The tune of the flute was quite clear despite the crackling on the transistor. Mustaqeen wanted to wait until it was over before turning off the knob of the radio. He decided to keep his plans to himself, and continued to drink his tea in little gulps, his eyelids half-closed, as though

nothing could be more important than these piping notes, fragile prayers to coolness, which got lost in the burning sky.

Vikram didn't hear them. However, he was feverish and jumpy, alert, as usually on winter mornings when the men were in a hurry, and racing through the ravines to warm themselves up. He came and sat down just in front of Mustaqeen, to tell him, boastfully:

'The cops have identified you, Baba Mustaqeen...'

Mustaqeen's eyes didn't leave his glass of tea. With a movement of his wrist, he began to make small circular movements, as if he wanted to reassure himself that all the grains of sugar had dissolved. He was still staring into the bottom of the container when he retorted:

'You too have been identified, Vikram Mallah. Because of her.'

He made a limp gesture in Devi's direction, and continued:

'She has...'

It was only when he lifted his head from his tea,—a mistake, because he caught Devi's eye and had to look away almost immediately,—that he added in a level voice.

'We must break up, Vikram Mallah.'

Vikram was rooted to the spot. Just a moment before, when he had sprung out in front of Mustaqeen, he was full of words he wanted to say, of proud phrases that he so favoured. But in a moment he had lost these words, and his ideas with them. His back crumpled, his back that was normally so straight and so firm, that it made him appear flamboyant. So much so that Mustaqeen himself felt ill at ease. He felt obliged to grumble while pointing in the direction of the river, now smothered by its sands:

'I am going to give up living in the Valley. I am going to go and wait for the rains on the other side of the Ganga. If you want to meet me when the cops have calmed down...'

Vikram was still speechless. Mustaqeen must have wondered if he had understood correctly because he repeated:

'On the other side of the Ganga, on the way to Lucknow. In Kanpur, they will tell you...'

He gave the name of one of their friends who was an arms dealer. Vikram continued to stare at him, unable to utter a single word. As the tune of the flute was beginning to fade away and Devi feared the ensuing silence, she decided to answer for Vikram. For once, she spoke without a trace of haughtiness, without interrupting her polishing of the six arms of the Goddess on the silver plate which decorated her Mauser. She addressed Mustaqeen in an even tone and the most tranquil of voices, the man to whom no bandit ever spoke until now without holding their breath:

'To break up suits us fine Baba Mustaqeen. Vikram and I were just thinking that it would be better if we joined up with the Singh brothers.'

## *46*

So why did they go towards the western States, towards Rajasthan where it was so hot? They should have taken exactly the opposite route in order to find Lalaram and Sri Ram, the road to Behmai where their village and temple were to be found. When asked about this, Devi had a ready answer. 'There were so many good omens on the western side. A jackal crossed the path from left to right, as it had on the night of the merger followed by the cry of a partridge. Another morning, in the middle of the ravine, she saw a male antelope, going from right to left, just as it was supposed to. If they had turned back, the signs would have turned against them.

All the same, there was something that Devi preferred not to say: she was the only one who saw these omens, and nobody else. Vikram had believed her, or pretended to. The truth is, she had done everything in her power to prevent him from taking the road to Behmai. For Lukka insists on this point: what they needed to know about the Singh brothers, Devi already knew. Lukka had already told her about them the evening of her outburst to Mustaqeen.

'She had been very clever, he remembers, and caught on to

the ruse before anyone else, even before Vikram himself, so that they could save face and leave Mustaqeen's band, their heads held high. But she had thrown out the name of the Singh brothers somewhat by accident. She didn't even know who she was talking about. 'I wanted to put her in the picture. I didn't delay, I dealt with the problem that very evening. In the beginning she didn't want to know about it. So I adopted another approach, I spoke to her about Kusumana. It was enough for me just to mention her name, to change her mind. The following evening, we were in Rajasthan.'

Therefore, the band headed towards the West, to lands that were already desert. The police remained apathetic. The gang took this opportunity of leaving the ravines, the men often walking in the river bed of the Chambal which was almost dry. They passed caravans, tribes of tough nomads, pushing forward without a pause, braving the midday sun. In front of the camels, Vikram spoke to Devi of rose and jasmine-coloured cities, hidden treasure at the bottom of the palace with lace-curtained windows, towns, deserts he had never seen and wonders too but which he invented as he went along. She let him speak, and let herself believe him. She needed to believe it all just as Vikram, for his part, needed to believe in the omens that she claimed to have seen on their path, in order to persuade him to continue towards the West.

They didn't go very far, although nothing happened with the police. The radio bulletins no longer made the slightest reference to the kidnappings, or even to the bandits. They only spoke of the drought. Sometimes they stopped for several days in a row. The heat as it rose performed a miracle : it melted them, rebels that they were, vagabonds, ignorant of the law and common ways of the melting pot of ordinary humanity. From then on, they were reduced to the same basic needs: shade and water.

From listening to Devi, it could be believed that these halts, these treks, lasted for months on end; she always came back to the subject and could stop talking about the burning winds that tortured the earth that year. The reality is, the trip to Rajasthan

mustn't have taken any longer than three weeks; and if these moments seem to occupy a vast part of her memories, it is also because they were the most passionate that she had ever spent in Vikram's company. Neither of them thought anymore either about the men or even danger. The only concession they made was to listen, as Mustaqeen had done, to the news bulletins on their radio. And as they no longer said anything about them nor about any other bandit for that matter, they did not eagerly await anything, apart from the attention they bestowed on each other. Not that it was all restful. They were living amidst dust and sand, always too close to the fiery sky, too close to the distressed earth. But during these long stretches in which time was prolonged, its monstrous grip numbing the men, they could both see clearly what it was that joined them together.

In this way, Devi, who had blindly loved Vikram, finally understood which woman he was seeking in her when he opened his arms to her. She anticipated the simplest of things, the minutest of attentions. Years later she could still remember, but she described it without any apparent emotion, as though it spoke for itself. 'Vikram was always attentive to my needs. When we were thirsty and we found water, he always made me drink first. At all times he insisted that I eat, even when I said that I wasn't hungry. When he washed his clothes, he washed mine too. Some days he even brushed my hair.'

Between them they also shared words—the real words of lovers, into which destiny is introduced without warning, words that come because they must, at a certain hour, a certain time, to seal irrevocable pacts. For example, one evening in the ruins of a mausoleum, while he was making love to her, Vikram told her she was his wife. He repeated her name over and over again, shouted it until the pleasure had ceased; and the next morning he asked her when she was going to bear him a child. She didn't answer, simply put her face against his, her cheek into the hollow of his cheekbone—he always maintained that here, their faces fitted perfectly into one another like two halves of a chapati just broken, or a fruit, freshly sliced. He then continued, 'I prefer you above all else,' before he hung up a target against an old

wall to instruct her to shoot, as he did every morning, with her own gun. He was proud of her, as she was becoming increasingly adept. 'You hid your strength from me for far too long,' he told her that morning. She remained silent, didn't dare look at him, she couldn't take her eyes off her rifle; she rubbed the worn hammer with the palm of her hand in the same thoughtful, gentle way that she rubbed his face after love-making, searching the former lives of his past. So Vikram gripped her by the chin, forced her to look at him, and went on: 'Now I know that you can earn a name for yourself and face your enemies like a real bandit. And he told her Putli's story once more.'

Often Devi stopped him saying: 'I know your story by heart; tell me something else!' She didn't do it that day. From Vikram's voice, she understood that he was beginning to waver between her own existence and the legend of the Bandit Queen and that she, Devi, was in the process of becoming a dream. The Guru had however taught her that nothing could be achieved if there was a dream behind the image of the woman; anything could happen, the best and the worst. For the moment, neither Vikram nor the Gods had taken sides. Therefore, it was merely a question of continuing with their lives.

So for him, and for him alone, during the feverish days that followed, she was the most gentle of women, one whom nothing could offend, the most tender, the most passionate, at the same time the strongest, whose heart the bullets targetted, hit more and more often, whose body both under and above his, corresponded perfectly. She was the drum beat when the flute faded out, the lively flute when the drum could beat no more. But always at the right moment. He felt a sense of righteousness on her behalf, as she did for him. Equally abandoned to disorder, to oblivion, what bitterness dissolved in the chaos of pleasure—like the dust in their saliva that they no longer even tasted. When the night drew in, and the heat didn't subside, when all the men, peasants or vagabonds were caught in the grip of insomnia and sat about staring at between the weary stars for signs of coolness, they were the only ones to sleep. Their necks were relaxed, their throats free of anguish, swallowed up by a deep sleep. Lovers

fatigue, they thought, oblivious to the Guru's lessons. He had, nonetheless, taught them to recognize the perverse disguises and the shadowy games of the queen of passions—Maya, the Mistress of Illusion.

## 47

For the river of desires had not been wasted on them. On the contrary, their caresses, their embraces felt eternal; they thought they had been delivered from the constraints of time. But deep down in their souls, pride lurked, the past, the future spied on them, memories and plans laid an ambush for them. All that was missing was the opportunity to act.

So one evening, after nightfall on the river bed, Devi told Vikram that she would like to make a quick visit to town. 'To Agra,' she said, 'Agra that wasn't too far.' 'To make a trip just for one day, and see a photographer.' On hearing the word photographer, Vikram's face fell. However, she persisted. 'The two of us in the same picture, both of us forever a token we could carry around, if ever anything happens; you never know, if ever...' 'You are crazy!' Vikram lashed out. 'I thought you were shrewder than that Phoolan Devi. If you want to have our portrait, you should wait until the police eliminate us. We bandits don't have portraits. At least not until we are dead.'

A few days later, it was Vikram's turn to be unexpectedly taken in by the snare of time, the Vikram, who reunited with the shadows of lives he had known before her—as if the gods of destiny revelled in that moment, at dusk when low clouds, heavy with chimeric rains came and blocked out the river's lines. Entirely unexpectedly, he started talking to her about his wife whom he had married ten years earlier. He had left her for the ravines a few months later, with a baby in her arms. He also told her about the orgies that Babu dragged him to, each year, after the raiding season. The gang went from one brothel to went another in the Valley, demanding to see naked women, dancing, sometimes sharing young girls, only twelve years old

left to them for the night in exchange for a watch or a transistor.

Devi listened without interrupting him. She was waiting for Kusumana's name to come up, but it didn't. As if he had anticipated this, Vikram hurried to finish what he was saying, stuttering hastily that he had never been as crazy about any woman as he was about her.

'For your eyes alone. I want to see the world through your eyes.'

For once there were no pauses in Vikram's sentences. His words flowed like a river that had burst its banks; they assumed the form of his desire that evening, irresistible, unreserved. Everything he had concealed until then for fear of losing her, he simply had to unveil. Secrets that had protected him so well fell by the wayside, one by one. He picked up their story from the beginning, telling her, for instance, that it was the day they met, the very moment he saw her in the shelter of the gorges, that he decided to tear her from Kailash. He returned again and again to her expression: 'Your eyes, you understand, the way you looked at me, fearlessly, for such a long time... And Kailash, that idiot who wasn't aware of anything... Each time he met me, he had to tell me how he used to made love to you, on the little sands, by the riverside. He frequently said you were a good lay. I almost went to see for my own eyes...'

With each sentence, Vikram became emboldened. He no longer saw danger and he went as far as to admit that the first night that Babu had forced her to come to his tent, he thought he was going to go mad. He swore to himself that he would kill her. 'That is how I found myself in your cousin Mayadin's house. He wanted to get rid of you, as I did. Between us, we struck a quick deal. I am the one who convinced Babu to kidnap you. I had even decided to cut your nose off before eliminating you.' Vikram was seized by laughter—a light laughter, calm, as though he were telling her a good joke. Devi stayed rooted to the spot. She contented herself with murmuring, 'A year ago, just one year.' Her voice was muted. It should have alarmed him, because it was even more critical when he repeated after her: 'Yes, one year; exactly one year.' For quite a while, he said nothing more.

Devi thought he had finished with his secrets. But she was wide off the mark, Vikram's memories were like sins; he had to confess them all before he could hope to sleep. He had a lump in his throat when he said:

'I didn't want to leave you with Babu. If he hadn't taken you in front of the men, I would have killed you.'

She didn't quiver; so he carried on, becoming more relieved with each word.

'Yes, I would have killed you, I am sure of it. I don't know exactly how. I am only sure I would have done it.'

'Ten thousand rupees, I see! It was a good deal...'

It was her turn this time to burst out laughing, but it was an angry, brittle laugh. Vikram tried to answer back:

'I paid for your Mauser with that wad of bank notes!'

'I thought it was a gift!'

'You know very well that you can only join a gang the day that you can pay for your own gun. I paid for you with the ten thousand rupees...'

'My death money!'

She pushed away the canvas with a kick, advanced a few steps towards the sands, and then retorted without glancing at him:

'Now that I know how to shoot, Mayadin...'

'Stop...We have lived ten thousand lives since then.'

'In that case, you shouldn't have brought up the subject again!'

He had moved to her side, wanted to take her by the waist. She struggled. Finally, she calmed down, and put her head on Vikram's shoulder. He thought he had won her over, and tried to bring her back towards their tent but just as he pulled her by the arm so that she could stretch out on the canvas he heard her whisper:

'Take me to Mayadin so that I can kill him.'

There was no answer. She stiffened:

'I am your wife. You told me so.' He turned his head away. She was enraged, and persisted:

'You told me that I was your wife, Vikram Mallah.'

His only answer was a long sigh. Then he tenderly grasped

her wrists, encircling them with his fingers, and amused himself by turning them around the slender joints, like a bracelet that was too big. The gesture must have surprised her or maybe moved her, for once again she let herself go. This time he found the strength to answer, raising his eyes at last:

'Yes, Devi, you are my wife. But I am first and foremost, my men's leader.'

'Mayadin...'

'Mayadin is past history. A story that concerns you alone. A girl that you no longer are. I have other things to do. My men too.'

In a commanding voice, short and sharp as it always was before an attack, when death breaks through each word, he added:

'Before killing a man that you want to avenge, learn first how to kill someone who has in no way offended you.'

'I have already taken revenge on Mansukh the policeman.'

'You aimed at him. But I was the first one to shoot. You didn't have to do anything. He arrived on his bicycle. We were on guard in the crevasse. I told you to shoot; you didn't react quickly enough, and...'

'I thought he had seen me!'

'You looked at him. Despite the fact that I told you never to look at your enemy when taking revenge. I did tell you that...'

Vikram had been right. Everything had happened just as he had said. He took advantage of it, insisted in a mocking voice. She was obliged to relive the moment that she wanted to banish from her mind, the moment when she couldn't pull the trigger and he had to fire instead of her, the roar of the gun, and worse than all of this, when she had to open her eyes again and to watch the body roll onto the roadside, the brain exploded, blood gushing as though from a spring.

'You weren't able to shoot... He had done something to you, all the same, that one... Tell me, what he did to you...'

'You did it for yourself, the policeman Mansukh, you shot first because you wanted to, you...'

With each word she pronounced she became weaker, he

realized this and took advantage of it, taking her now by the shoulders, kneading her flesh. She couldn't put up a fight any longer; She was perspiring. With each passing second the heat crushed her further still. As though in the grasp of the same exhaustion, Vikram dragged her down with him onto the canvas. However, just as he was taking off his shirt, he couldn't resist provoking her one last time:

'Are you sure that you, a woman, would have the nerve to kill a man who has done nothing to offend you? To kill him just for the sake of killing him...?'

He made thousands of such remarks, nervous and fiery, each day during the fever preceding the monsoon. Nevertheless, Devi didn't quite see it like that. She immediately broke free from Vikram's grasp, and got up. As soon as she had freed herself, she shouted at him in the dark:

'Wait and see tomorrow morning, Vikram Mallah! You will see. Do you hear? Not any later than tomorrow morning...'

Not one of the men moved; maybe they hadn't heard her, or had preferred not to hear her. The heat was so intense. In turn, she too became sluggish. Her anger subsided just as quickly as it had flared up. She took a little walk around the camp, went to lie down a little further away, then came back to lie down beside Vikram.

He was already dozing. She took a long time falling asleep. The heat played a part, naturally, the night of ordinary men; she had forgotten that she was so heavy, so slow. She repeatedly went over what Vikram had said to her. It was so difficult to become like the dream that he had created of her!

The sun wasn't even up yet when she went off patrolling, her machine gun on her shoulder, until she reached the spot where the sands started. She had woken him before leaving, told him what she was going to do. He hadn't protested hadn't tried to hold her back, had even accompanied her. They had wandered for at least an hour along the banks, until they met an old, fatigued peasant going to wash his rags in what was left of the river. She killed him there and then, wordlessly, without warning, almost at blank range. The man had only seen her at the last

minute. Standing above the sand absorbing his blood, Vikram didn't find much to say, apart from an expression he must have heard from the Guru. 'When we take revenge, death at least tastes like salt.' Having said this, he looked up at the sky. With the impending day, its blue-grey colour was turning to dark metal. Suddenly grown hard with a strange will that she didn't understand, he uttered: 'Right, that's enough. Now we are going to find the Singh brothers.'

## *48*

The presence of the Singh brothers from the beginning of June 1980 in Vikram Mallah's band is confirmed in the police reports of the Etawah region, as well as in an official document coming from an isolated station in the gorges of Betwa, south of the Hamirpur jungles. A new kind of raid was undertaken; the nightly attacks on lorries circulating on one of the most frequented roads in India, Highway 2, which links Delhi to Calcutta. The method of attack was always the same. A group of men positioned themselves a hundred metres behind the gang, and tipped off, by walkie-talkie, which vehicles to attack. Dressed in police uniforms, the gang leader and his men ordered the drivers to stop their vehicles at the end of the road. One of the gangsters brandished a few typed pages which he presented as a search warrant. The lorry, he claimed, was carrying drugs and had to be searched. The driver who was usually illiterate, didn't protest. Scarcely out of his vehicle, he was stripped of all his personal belongings, tied up and gagged, as were any passengers that he happened to be driving. Then the bandits punctured the wheels of the lorry before emptying it out.

The day after the first smash and grab attack, the police cited that twenty-two vehicles had been ransacked. After the second one, a week later, they amounted to thirty-six. Vikram must have been particularly proud of this last exploit, for he wanted to put his signature to it. On the last vehicle he ransacked, he stuck a sheet on which Attu, dictated to by Vikram, wrote this brazen

message: in perfect English: 'Dogs of policemen! Vikram Mallah is the one who held up these thirty-six lorries. Don't accuse the poor; they are innocent. If you are looking for the guilty party, come and see Vikram Mallah and Phoolan Devi!'

Police reports fail to mention what kind of merchandise was stolen. In the main, it was probably food, easy to sell in times of shortage. A week later, Vikram made a gift of eighty-five thousand rupees to the Singh brothers out of his own share, an advance on their future gains, so that they could decently offer a dowry for one of their nieces, an orphan, who was to marry in the near future. Vikram wanted to escort them to their village in Behmai. He was going with them to deposit the money at the home of the dumb-founded fiance. As if he were the father or the grandfather of the bride-to-be, he had distributed watches, transistors, and small pieces of jewellery to her relations, which had come to his hands after the loot had been divided.

Of course, the news travelled fast. The local police were immediately informed by the Mallahs employed on Thakur land. Even at the risk of denouncing a brother of the same caste, they were only too happy to betray their masters. The news greatly embarrassed the police; but a lot less than it did the senior civil servants in Kanpur, when the press, following the second attack, published a facsimile of the small poster which Vikram had stuck on the last lorry. The next day, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh was grilled in the state legislature and as was to be expected, the opposition accused him of negligence and corruption. Several members of his own party also reminded him, in rather brutal terms, that he was supposed to be representing the purity and the many thousands of interests of the superior castes who had brought him to power and they frankly declared that the failure to punish the rogues of Highway 2, as the newspapers called them, could easily cost him his seat in the next elections.

The day after this lively debate, the entire hierarchy of the police was extremely agitated. From the offices of Inspector General Mahendra to the most isolated station in the jungles, there was talk of nothing else—even if no price had been put

on his head—but the capture of Vikram Mallah dead or alive—if possible in the company of his damned soul, this girl with the name of a flower, who was more beautiful than any movie star.

## 49

Just before the rains, in the depths of the night, fantasies and deceit like to visit mankind. Heat and sweat serve as a mould, where they swell unbelievably; and as the sky overflows with clouds, a veil, a fog, covers every soul, distorting judgement and leading to errors. Devi has no other explanation for Vikram's strangeness in the month of June 1980. Nor can she account for hers. The fact is she followed him without the slightest hesitation, without making known what she was feeling, what she had observed. And what she both felt and observed, was that he was mad, that he was going too far; but for his sake, she had wanted to be mad too, to go that far with him.

Because of this, she doesn't even remember anymore how the band left Rajasthan, or how the men found themselves attacking lorries on Highway No.2. She only remembers meeting up with the Singh brothers below Behmai, on the threshold of their temple, near the drinks dispenser painted in red and black which now only spat out rose-water instead of the usual cane alcohol that it had distributed before the shortage.

She saw the Singh brothers dozing off on top of one another in the shade of an awning, near the statue of the Goddess. As soon as Vikram woke them up, she took an instant dislike to them. To begin with, they smelt terrible; they had no excuse, because the river in which they could have washed themselves; flowed just beside them. Then there was something in Vikram's voice when he greeted them, something a little too humble that reminded Devi of her father when he spoke to Thakur landowners. Even in love, Vikram had never shown that kind of weakness towards her. Furthermore, was the way Vikram approached these two pigs with yellow, rheumy eyes—possibly it was that which that smelt badly. He imperceptibly bowed just

as he was about to speak to them; a minor detail, but a detail that she was sensitive to, that brought to mind, yet again, her father's obsequiousness. In any case, there was no doubting the fact that Vikram was under the thumb of those two rascals.

Despite all this, she didn't say or do anything; she felt lifeless, her expression: worn out, her energy depleted. It must be said that Vikram had already turned towards her. He stood up straight, puffed out his chest and signalled to her to come forward. He compelled the Singh brothers, Thakurs in spite of their names which proclaimed only warlike glories, to salute her as though she were a queen. As the twins found themselves obliged to join their hands before her, Vikram pronounced these lavish words: 'This is Devi, my wife and my equal. Honour her as you would your own daughter. Fate has not been kind to her.'

He had scarcely finished this elegant declaration when he looked away. He took a sachet of sindoor, sacred vermillion powder out of his pocket—the precious red mixture that the Guru hands over, there in the depths of the forest, before sending his disciples away to face the outer world. Disregarding the worth of this divine asset, Vikram didn't hesitate to apply to the sticky, smelly foreheads of the Singh brothers. He traced a circle, then the star, symbols that attract the favours of the lady of the forest to both body and soul. Continuing, Vikram paid tribute to the twins with generous and noble phrases—words that had such a ring to them, that they remain etched in the memory for all time, never to be forgotten: 'Sri Ram and Lalaram, you have greatly suffered in prison. Come with me, follow me. I am taking you into this band which, from now on, is yours. Come and share with us once more the salt of equality and the honey of justice.'

At this point, the two brothers, in particular the stockier of the two, who Lukka used to call Tool Box, made an obvious grimace. However, the small thin one, the Boss, the man with the long, pockmarked face, came to his senses very quickly. He gave his twin brother a smack on the back—which was more like a sign of complicity, a code that had always been between

them. The other lowered his head; nevertheless, he relentlessly stared at Vikram with a pupil that swelled with cunning fury.

None of this escaped Devi's notice. However, she was struck dumb before these two faces which stank of such obvious vice: it was the first time that Vikram had called her his wife in front of strangers. A woman had just approached, and was handing her a copper vessel that had been filled at the river. Devi just stretched out her arm and grasped it. The metal was hot, the water far from cold. The woman bent down to find her a glass. Devi didn't wait. She drank straight from the vessel.

She drank without taking a breath, her head thrown back, animal-like, her breast heaving, shamelessly without wasting a single drop of the liquid, as was customary in the ravines; then she collapsed underneath the awning, and closed her eyes. It was in a complete haze that she heard Vikram continue to brag: 'Have you seen the band, our arms...' 'Everything is going well, I can see that, Boss cut in. 'You have new arms, and even a mistress.' 'She is my wife,' corrected Vikram. 'Your wife, your wife' the Guru sniggered, and behind him the Tool Box muttered something that sounded obscene.

All those present pretended not to hear. As the men were beginning to scatter, to fill their flasks at the river, Vikram untied his machine-gun from his shoulder and handed it to Boss saying, in the same solemn manner as when he had accepted the offerings of sacred ash given by the Guru. 'Take it, Sri Ram. Take my gun. It is good to have you among us.' The Boss made a vague gesture of refusal. Vikram insisted: 'I have a hiding place where I still have some arms. And I have another rifle for your brother. We will take care of it later this evening. Go on, take it.'

So it was that the Singh brothers joined the band: that is, with the greatest indifference. For the men, nothing was more important than the day the rains would finally come. Risks, hatreds, plans, even the notion that time could unfold into the future, none of these things had any meaning, for as long as it remained so hot. It was the same for Devi, and Lukka. Their instincts weren't dulled; just as the others were, only dimmed

for the moment. If they went along with the attacks on the Highway, it was because little or no danger was involved. For Lukka confirms, as does Devi, that the plan for the raids on Highway 2 was the Boss' and not Vikram's. And for once their allegations were similar to those of the Mallah informers in Behmai. He had been toying with the idea for several years now. At the end of the second attack, he could easily have taken advantage of this fact and forced Vikram to sign his name beside his on the small poster in which he claimed responsibility for both raids. But the Boss kept himself to himself. Neither did he protest when Vikram dictated Devi's name to Attu, after his own.

It was also the Boss who requested Vikram to accompany him to his niece's house in Behmai, to present her the sum for her dowry. Vikram didn't have to be asked twice, he went up there and paraded around like pariali who had just won the lottery. Even so, Behmai was the old capital of Thakur country, source of all the attacks on the Mallahs in the past, when the warriors from the north had swept over the Valley, seize to their lands. It was all history, but there were still many songs that related it; children learnt them when still in the cradle; one of the two versions, depending on whether they were born Thakurs or Mallahs—depending on the hatred they had been fed. When Vikram had gone up to the village, Devi had been completely against it, despite her inertia. However, she was too lethargic to waste time speaking. She had to content herself with dryly refusing when he suggested she come along with him. She stayed back to lie down close to the temple, down below the village. It was only when Vikram returned and the men had spoken to him about the gifts he had distributed to the Boss' family, that she realised she should have prevented him from going up to Behmai.

After the event of course, Devi and Lukka made all kinds of excuses—probably because they weren't very proud of having failed to stop him. Although he discussed it from time to time, Vikram hadn't really made up his mind to share power with the Boss; he didn't offer him anything, Lukka argued. 'Besides, the Boss didn't ask him for anything. He didn't even ask for an

account of how Babu died. He knew very well how it happened, he knew why too; but he played dumb and said nothing. Anyway, he and his brother were at the end of their tether when they came out of prison. They had no arms left, nothing, not even a rupee. They really needed us and they seemed relieved. The Boss; made a good strike straight away. Our pockets were filled . What more could we have asked for?'

As far as the small poster was concerned, Devi showed the same sort of indulgence. In order to defend Vikram, she used remarks which were at once vehement and thoughtful : 'Vikram was right to tell the police that we were responsible for the attacks. Otherwise, those dogs would have done what they always do, and blamed innocent people. Anyway, we didn't kill anyone on the Highway!' In any event, Vikram was always like that, he couldn't help himself from being defiant and derisive. Now and again Vikram was a child, such a child. 'He was well aware that we couldn't pull off a third attack on the roads without being caught. He would prefer to give himself away than compromise.'

On the last point, she was mistaken. All the witnesses agree: as soon as he entered Behmai, Vikram pulled himself together. He didn't wait for the radio bulletins before announcing to the band, the Boss and Tool Box included, that there would be no third attack and that they must hide until the rains returned. He had chosen a den that was almost impossible to reach, south of the river and protected by the steep gorges of the Betwa river. Moreover, panthers roamed its jungles, the thick and ancient forest of Hamirpur.



They got as far as these jungles. To do so, they had to cross the plain which they did unconcerned by its cracked earth, by the long procession of gaunt women who walked in every direction in search of wells that were dried up increasingly and were further away each time. The sky had only just begun to darken;

not a single glimmer pierced it, even in the distance; not a single rumble of thunder to indicate that one day it could burst. The countryside was wasting away with anxiety; they could see that. On the walls of the houses, tantric yantras, with triangles and magic circles that invoked the rain had been inscribed.

Vikram and his men passed through noiselessly, confident, almost joyous. Their backpacks were light; before they left, they had stashed their loot in hiding places and placed their money with usurers in villages considered safe. They were only carrying the bare essentials, ammunition and food for a month. Near Betwa there was water, Vikram told them, thickets that were always green, springs that never dried up. Naturally, he had stressed, repeating shamelessly word for word the lessons of the Guru about the forest. He concluded, even more gravely: that the first lesson in the forest was to understand that the maze of mankind was infinitely worse; but more dense than all of this was the forest of Maya.

He didn't realise just how right he was. For it was in the forest that the truth was revealed.

It took the band at least a week to reach the springs; it was a moment of great jubilation when they suddenly came upon them after hours of struggling along the arid hillside where the low, grey thornbushes ceaselessly grazed their legs and cheeks. The dust quickly disappeared, the heat itself seemed to decrease before these great falls of clear water streaming over sheets of sandstone. Suddenly, the earth ceased to be torn apart and pained, to be an open wound to all the demons of the Valley, brambles, undergrowth, scrubland, scorpions, wild-cats, snakes; rather it was a pliant earth, tender, that soothed and welcomed.

After having drunk, almost all the men slumped down to sleep, not noticing the mosquitoes, the cry of the budgies, or the playfulness of the monkeys who jumped from one branch to another. They were less worried as they had enough to eat and especially to drink: this water, by their side generous and inexhaustible. There was nothing else to do but stay put.

That was also Vikram's intention. As soon as the men arose

from their slumber, he gave them the details of his plan. They wouldn't move before the first downpour. As soon as they started they would hurry down the long slope that led to Betwa. Its cliffs were covered with grottos in which they could take shelter. They would walk down the course of the river, taking their time, through its deserted gorges, inhabited only by jackals and vultures. He felt that by then the rains would have set in properly and the policemen, weighed down by their own laziness, wouldn't venture outdoors.

Vikram had thought the whole thing through, Lukka recalls. He knew the region by heart all the sandbanks, all the fords, the whirlwinds, the footpaths halfway up the cliffs in case the river overflowed. His move had been perfectly calculated. And as there was nothing wrong with it, nobody said anything.'

Not even him, Lukka, the old bandit, as he himself admitted. He, the wise Lukka, the man who had seen everything, this time, saw nothing.

After this, he never stopped reproaching himself. He repeatedly said that he didn't understand what had happened to him. Perhaps, it stemmed from the sudden pleasures of the halt, of forgetfulness, the burden of age, or to be completely honest, a languor added to the spring water by subtle and devious gods.

## *51*

Things moved very quickly. Everything happened that very evening. After only a quarter of an hour's walk, Devi spotted a second clearing with a tiny stream. She went to wash herself in it, then returned to practise shooting. Before setting off, she had warned everyone, not to disturb her, not even Vikram.

All the more reason she was startled when she realised, just as she had fired, that she was being watched from behind a tree. It was the Boss. She hadn't heard him coming. Her first instinct was to check if he was armed. He wasn't. So she decided to ignore him.

He stayed leaning against a tree, observing her shooting at the target. After a while he couldn't contain himself any longer, and said:

'Are you going to spend all your life with Vikram Mallah?'

Her eyes never left her cartridges; it was only as she was about to take aim once more that she deigned to answer :

'So what if I do?'

The Boss approached her; he sat right beside her and continued. 'Because there are people in the band who think that you have all the qualities to become a leader. Some day, you will have your own gang. I am telling you. You will see...'

He was interrupted by her first bullet. She fired about ten times; and he had to wait for her to finish before he could carry on:

'Pernaps you and I could lead a gang.'

With this, she dropped her rifle and burst out laughing—it was more a snigger, in fact, long and deep, which echoed off the walls of sandstone. The Boss seemed to be piqued. She presumed that he was going to leave it at that, and already felt relieved. But he insisted, in an even darker voice: 'Yes, you and I. To lead the same gang.'

'What are you talking about!'

She had started to laugh again, and returned to her shooting. However, this time she stopped after only two shots; she turned to face him and coldly resumed, looking at him straight in his yellow eyes:

'So, Boss, are you going to explain to me what all this is about?'

He got up, and took a few steps towards the stream in which she had washed herself. His head remained lowered, and he continued to bite his lip. Finally, he came back to her. He stood up straight and declared with an earnestness that made her think of Vikram:

'Because it would be a great honour to serve by your side, Phoolan Devi.'

She was left speechless. At once he took advantage of this to add:

'If I could choose a woman to run the gorges with me, that

woman would be you. Nowhere in the Valley could I find someone better. You are a great rebel. A great bandit.'

She was taken aback for a moment. He was imitating Vikram, getting carried away with his words—honour, rebel, great bandit. Except that coming from the smooth-tongued Boss, the most elegant of phrases appeared brittle. For this fallacy alone, she didn't pull her punches:

'Be on your way, Thakur dog. I have one man, he is enough for me. I don't need a little vulture like you between my legs.'

At first she felt that maybe she had gone too far. Sure of his arguments, and of obtaining what he desired, the Boss was ready to endure anything. Anything but insults, that is. And particularly not that one: Thakur dog.

But having said it Devi didn't regret it. She promptly set about firing at her target, without as much as a glance at him, with the result that he stormed off. She continued training for at least another quarter of an hour. When she returned to the camp, she had taken a decision, to tell Vikram everything.

So she spoke to him about it that very night, as soon as they were lying down. He let her talk without asking a single question. When she had finished, his silence became more intense in the darkness, so much so that she couldn't hear his breathing anymore. He repeated unceasingly:

'Swear to me that it's true. On the Goddess, swear to me that it's true...'

He was holding her hand; and he held it so tight that she cried out. As if this moan had served as a declaration, he roughly picked up his torch, ran straight to the tarpaulin where he knew the Singh brothers to be asleep. He levelled his light at the Boss' face, took him by the collar and shook him with all his might,. then dropped him, bellowing into the night in as far-reaching a manner as possible:

'Don't play around with my wife, Sri Ram Singh! Don't touch as much as a hair on her head!' And that was that. Not a soul moved in the camp, not Lukka, not even the Tool Box. As for Vikram, his anger had been exhausted in this single roar, and he came back to collapse silently by Devi's side.

Following this cry, only the rustling of branches could be heard in the clearing, animals no doubt; and between the tarpaulins, whispers that were quickly muffled, surreptitious murmurings to which Vikram and Devi paid not the slightest attention. The drowsiness stalking the camp for a while now had begun to restore their bodies. It didn't lose time weighing them down in its viscous torpor, so heavy, that with the first rays of light as they awoke—at the same time, and the first in the gang as always—they found that the mischief had already been done, long before. The Singh brothers had deserted.

They had been accompanied by some of the gang, all Thakurs, who had loaded into their backpacks the reserves of food and most of the ammunition.

## *52*

Only one Thakur remained: a young, fragile scout, Avtar, who detested the two brothers since Tool Box had tried to bully him under the mocking gaze of his twin brother. Avtar informed Vikram that the Boss had been plotting against him for at least two weeks now, with the rest of the Thakurs in the band. He didn't have to explain why; Vikram already understood, and knew he had just had a close shave with death. It was the Boss' choice of methods that amazed him far more: for mysterious reasons that maybe had something to do with the onset of rumours concerning a new Bandit Queen, the Boss was convinced that he could only succeed if he possessed Devi.

Avtar took the greatest of pleasure in listing his infidelities, and Vikram listened to him without interruption, as if he had to weigh up Boss' treachery in all its magnitude, before he could admit that he had been duped. He did let slip a wry smile when Avtar told him, that despite his craftiness, the Boss had stumbled across an unexpected danger: Devi herself. In spite of her jeans and her red headband, her resilience and her manly ways, in spite of the rumour that now named her the new Putli, the Boss had

never been able to regard her as anything other than Kusumana's portrayal of her: a prostitute. In order to flatter him, a few Thakurs had encouraged this fantasy by boasting that they had already slept with her. The Boss believed them. When he had come across Devi in the clearing, he hadn't imagined for one moment that she would repudiate him. Even less, that she would insult him, and then speak to Vikram about it. As a matter of fact, the Thakurs were very surprised to see him rooted to the spot when Vikram had come and threatened him. They understood from this, however, that he must have failed with Devi; that his revenge would begin with flight, rather than with blood and violence.

It all took place around midnight, according to Avtar. The Thakurs had been ready to leave in less than half an hour. They had been so impatient to decamp that they hadn't noticed that he, Avtar, had remained behind. As soon as he had heard them racing down the slope that led to the river, he had returned to slump under his tarpaulin, and sleep once again, relieved. But he had been just as flabbergasted as the others when he awoke to find that they had taken the food and the cartridges.

'That's enough,' Vikram cut in.

He tapped the hammer of his gun, his jaw hardening with each second. Avtar continued:

'I didn't betray, that night... As for the food, I didn't know...

'You are a Thakur?'

The other didn't dare answer. Vikram drew closer, repeated the question. He finally agreed he was. Vikram raised his machine-gun and retorted dryly:

'My men don't live off words alone.'

In the next moment, Avtar was rolling at his feet, his head smashed into smithereens by a round of fire. Vikram seized Lukka by the shoulder, then Devi, and pushed both of them as far as the cliffs. He only stopped when he reached the very edge of the incline; in a voice that had never been calmer, he pointed to stretch of water that glimmered at the bottom of the gully, and said :

'Here we are together. Just the three of us.'

They didn't stop to bury Avtar's body; they simply threw it from the top of a sheer drop. In fact, they didn't even wait to wash themselves. First of all an inventory of the remaining ammunition was made; everyone and everything was counted. There were only fifteen persons left, all Mallahs or of the lower castes. Quickly, a plan was made. Firstly, they had to eat. For this, there was no other solution but to attack the peasants. They would have to pass through the Betwa—fortunately, it was no longer very deep. Then they would make a raid on the first village they came across.

The band started to trudge and as the omens were good they attacked just before midnight. Everything happened without mishap, the men swiped everything left in the lofts. The peasants had been taken off guard; they had put up no resistance.

Usually, Vikram placed himself high on a ridge overlooking the houses, so that he could give the alert and order a retreat if they needed to withdraw. Devi was at the other end of the rock-face, also scanning the horizon. Moving in all directions, enormous clouds of dust had begun to smother the evening sun.

Just as the men were climbing the rocks to rejoin them, she heard an explosion; and almost simultaneously, a muffled cry. For a moment she thought that one of the men had stayed behind and had been taken by surprise by one of the villagers. Only when she had turned her head in every direction, did she realise that it was Vikram who had been hit.

She ran to him; she didn't even try to determine where the shot had come from. He had fainted, blood was already soaking his trousers, which she immediately ripped away. He was wounded in the thigh, just above the knee. She grabbed her backpack, seized a tee-shirt, and made a tourniquet; then, as Vikram's mouth was still half-open, she slipped in a big tumblerful of alcohol, which worked so well, that he regained consciousness even before the band had caught up with them.

When Vikram came to, he realised that he couldn't walk

anymore. They would have to carry him, there was no longer any question of them climbing down the gorges of the Betwa river. He figured that they would have to approach them from the opposite direction, then enter the eastern plains in order to find Mustaqeen. It would take them at least a week. But if things continued as before, the rains wouldn't come for another ten days or so; even if the booty from the attack was insignificant, they still had enough to last out until then.

Vikram had come to these conclusions quickly, as always. Several times a shiver racked his body from head to toe—a wave of pain, Devi thought, that he could scarcely control. Right in the middle of his speech, he had asked her to pour him a little of the alcohol that was left; then he hastened to finish in a few dry words, his orders to the men; to go back down the river as quickly as possible, to a large grotto he had noticed on the banks, where they could perhaps spend the night.



It came down straight, in torrents, a cataclysm of water and mud. The sky, had simply opened up.

It wasn't as always. Normally, the rain showed some warning signs. There would be false alarms. The winds would suddenly rise only to drop again; there would be rumblings on the horizon, thunderbolts, black skies in the middle of the day. For the rain could not bear to come unexpectedly; every other year, it had to be begged. It had played the tease, called for patience. That was simply the way things were, this dance of desire which preceded the offerings of life. It started with a shower, a lovely cloudburst that cooled down the air, and made the earth steam. Following this, the heat returned for just one day and one night, the shrivelled earth splitting once again, seemingly set on returning to what it had been for months, an open wound submitting itself to an endless blaze. Then another storm burst, more violent than the previous one, and the water began to soak through the earth. A brief respite followed, for the sky quickly

unleashed another downpour, which unreservedly swamped the ravines and the fields.

But as it happened, that year, between the Ganga and the Betwa, the rain came without warning, in all its majesty. In just one day, it filled the crevices, invigorated the rivers and the streams, silted up the countryside, turning it into a spongy marshland that hindered the step. The gang took over two weeks to emerge from the ravines; and when they reached the plain all the rivers were overflowing.

The Ganga itself had burst its banks, and so it proved impossible to reach Mustaqeen on the other side. They were at the end of their reserves, and the deluge prohibited any form of attack. They could just about empty out a farm here and there, seize from the isolated peasants the little that they had left. Besides, Vikram's wound, had become infected. It wasn't very deep. Lukka had asked Kalla, who was familiar with the different herbs, to find the roots that mitigated the burning sensation in the wounds. But to find them, they would have to wait until they were out of the ravines. Too late: for there was mud everywhere, and it had buried the plants.

The moon was on the wane, a phase when fevers rage. Vikram's wound was choked with pus; each time Devi changed the bandages, he nevertheless repeated: 'In three days it will be over, the devi is watching over me, no one will ever kill me, the devi has been with me; for too long now...'

But his men could see that his face was the colour of mud; they all guessed that his body was on fire. From the very first night, when, like the previous year, they had to spread their tarpaulins amidst the marsh, they had asked themselves, how they come to be in these circumstances, whereas a month earlier they had been considered the most prosperous gang in the Valley. They looked back to a day during the last monsoon, when Babu fell under the shower of Vikram's bullets. Who could have caused so many excellent and daring omens to appear on their path. Who could have instilled in Vikram's mind his extravagant loyalty to the Singh brothers, if not a power that was hell-bent on their downfall? Who else, but Babu, whose body hadn't been

returned to his family, and had refused to burn. Babu who had been delivered to an impure fire of kerosene, without either incense or garlands. Babu, whose spirit must surely have been silently following them since that day, waiting to take the revenge that would open the doors of the City of Yama. Everything pointed to this as the root of their present misery.

Fear even took over the toughest. Even Badru and Balo, the two huge twins, who were always smiling and who never spoke; even the handsome Baladin who normally walked gaily at the head of the file; and the little dreamer, Kok, who always had his head in the clouds, and seemed oblivious to everything; even Plazza, a lively scout who was in the prime of life and who could carry two backpacks without any trouble, his own and Vikram's since he had been wounded. During these nights of rain and hunger, they were all invaded by black thoughts and terrifying words; the spirit of death came and corrupted their sleep. During the day, they dreamt of deserting.

It was a melancholy mood particular to bands. Vikram recognized it immediately, in spite of his fever.

He preferred to make the first move:

'It's every man for himself from now on,' he announced. 'I am going to don my peasants' clothes and go to Gwalior to be cured. I am going to take the train with Devi.'

By the shudder that crept through the gang, he understood that the men were relieved; he felt he had hit the nail on the head. And it wasn't only the fever that caused his voice to break as he forced himself to continue:

'The police are quiet there. We will meet up again after the rains.'

'He was pathetic to look at,' Lukka remembers. 'He was well aware of the fact that we had all decided to leave. But when I advised him to listen to the radio before setting off, it wasn't out of pity, in order to delay the moment of separation. It was a precaution, not taken for him, nor for the others. But for me and Kalla. Every man for himself, Vikram was right. He could easily have said nothing at all. In fact, we had already known it coming for ages.

## 55

Once again, the radio decided the band's fate. Apart from the monsoon and the ensuing events following the accidental death of Sanjay Gandhi, younger son of Indira, only one other item was broadcast: the stir caused by the massacre of some peasants in a neighbouring State. In spite of the rains, the normally languorous police of Madhya Pradesh, was in turn, on the warpath. The person responsible for this agitation was Pan Singh Tomar, one of the more surprising bandits from the Crime Belt. Before fleeing into the gorges, he had won the gold medal for the marathon at the Asian Games in Tokyo in 1958, and been mooted as a possible participant for the Olympic Games. But finally he had returned to his village, where he swiftly took to the ravines and organized a formidable gang with his brother. A few months before the monsoon, after they had been exposed, his gang had come into armed conflict with the police, and his brother had died. Pan Singh had managed to tear his corpse away from the police and had fled into the gorges; carrying him on his back, for tens and tens of miles, before arriving in Rajasthan in Bharatpur, the town where he was born. Here he succeeded in cremating him with his own hands according to tradition. This feat had turned Pan Singh into a living legend. Nevertheless, a few days earlier, the living legend had returned to the village in which the police had killed his brother, and coldly murdered five people, one of whom was an old man, in broad daylight, and in the presence of about twenty witnesses. This brazen act was furthered when he took the time to leave a blazing note on the dead bodies, claiming responsibility for the crime, and giving in minute detail all the powerful reasons that had forced him to do it.

The radio bulletin mentioned several editorials that had been inspired by the whole business, and it hit the headlines in all the daily newspapers in Delhi. To begin with, the news affected them in only one way : it barred access to the roads leading south and west, where the monsoon had been less violent; but it also prevented Vikram from going to Gwalior.

There was only one way out, Lukka concluded, distantly, to show Vikram that he was not confusing his fate with that of the band's : they had to find the house of a friend, a village where they had relations, men that they had done favours for in the past. Then they could discreetly bring along someone well versed in ayurveda, who could cure him with plants , stone powders, slowworms, and elixirs which have been made in the heart of the countryside since time began.

Lukka's reference to a 'friendly village' wasn't entirely innocent. He remembered that Vikram was born downstream. Though, he no longer had any family in his birthplace, he recalled having an uncle who lived in Rajpur, a very big market town not far from where they were, on the border of the two States. Vikram hadn't seen his uncle for years, but the region was perfect for the convalescence of a wounded person wanted by the police : an enormous maze of houses, small courtyards and shops, set out in tiers around a hill which overlooked a river. They could quite easily hide there. It was even in their best interests to do so, as it was to send scouts ahead before venturing in there, for it lay right in the heart of Thakur country.

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Plazza and Kok were assigned to go to Rajpur on this mission. They encountered no problems. Vikram's uncle lived in a big house overlooking the river, at the far end of the Mallah district, at the furthest extremity of a maze of side streets and courtyards. Besides his sons and their wives, he was putting up one of his nieces, Prianka. She was sixteen, and was struck by a debilitating, wasting disease. She hardly ever left her bed. A herbalist still came to visit her in an attempt to lessen the severity of an end that was deemed imminent.

This particular man was there the day Vikram moved into his uncle, Barelal's house. He was a tiny man, dry but very lively. Immediately, he understood that Vikram's wound was caused by a bullet and that he was a bandit. Even so, he asked no

questions. He simply made him drink a greenish liquid from a small bottle that he kept in his cloth bag, among his packets of herbs. Then he massaged his legs and stomach for a long time, muttering incantations. Finally, he took out a jar of plaster, which he applied to the wound. Vikram was soon asleep. The herbalist remained crouched at his side, silent, his eyelids lowered once again—almost as if he too were asleep. Nonetheless, as soon as Devi started to nod off, he hastily jumped up and disappeared.

Vikram slept for three days and three nights at a stretch. During the first two nights, Devi didn't get a wink of sleep. Each time she dozed off, the capricious pattering of the rains came and spitefully tore this fragile peace from her. It was more than she could bear. She had to lay her forehead next to Vikram's. If he was no longer feverish, she became hopeful once more. A moment later, she touched his cheek, his arms, found them to be frozen. Once again she became quietly desperate. On the third evening, at the end of her tether, she begged uncle Barelal to bring back the herbalist. 'He comes when he feels like it,' Barelal answered resignedly. He doesn't save men; he only looks after them.' This answer left her demoralized. She parted without a word, to watch over Vikram. However, strangely enough, she managed to sleep; and when the dawn broke, it was Vikram who woke her up.

He didn't feel any better, and straight away asked for the herbalist. She didn't dare repeat Barelal's answer; she simply told him that it had been raining incessantly, that mud was beginning to cut off the roads, that his uncle himself didn't even know where he lived. Vikram wanted to know if the men in the band had come to see how he was, as Lukka had promised to do when they were splitting up. Devi hadn't seen a soul. No matter how often she repeated excuses, a kind of anguish took hold of Vikram and wouldn't let go. He dwelt on the declarations that Lukka had made at the crossroads of the paths leading to Rajpur, when Plazza and Kok, returning from his uncle, had announced that the way was clear and that Barelal would be happy to hide him. Lukka had sworn that he would do everything in his power to prevent the gang from breaking up. He had promised that

while Vikram, was being cured, he would take the men to a shelter in the underground temples upstream, and that he would send scouts to Rajpur twice a week disguised as peasants, to fetch provisions and find out what was happening to him. 'Fine words,' Vikram now complained, fine promises; they have all gone, every man for himself and Lukka before them all! No one came to see me, no one will ever come to see me.' Then he would brood endlessly over the same fears, contrary to the first ones. Had the police captured the band. Had the Singh brothers caught up with him.' Had the overflowing river swallowed all his men up. Did Lukka belong to a stock of traitors? Fear darkened his soul. He no longer knew what to dread; everything seemed to be confused in his mind. He had forgotten the knowledge of kundalini shakti. All he could see within himself was weakness; he almost ended up by exulting in this long catalogue of complaints: his wound that wasn't healing, the rains which were becoming increasingly violent, this refuge which wasn't really one, being in the middle of Thakur country. This in turn stimulated the pleasure of listing all the threats that this implied—even if his uncle's house was at the very end of the poorer people's quarter, behind the barbers shops and the weavers courtyards. Who could guarantee that he wasn't being spied on, who could swear that he wouldn't be turned in? There was a police station in Rajpur, Barelal had told him, with a radio antenna as they had in Kalpi, and several jeeps. His uncle had neighbours, servants. As for the herbalist he hadn't actually said anything on seeing his wound but he had understood straight away, had thought as much. If he hadn't come back, maybe it was because he had simply betrayed them.

When they arrived, Barelal had assured them that Prianka's was a lost case, that she wouldn't last the week. Devi had never seen her out of bed. She had tried several times to approach her, had sent the servants away so that she could hand her a glass of water, whisper a few words of comfort to her. Prianka had never answered her, she had always appeared to be asleep , like Vikram, the cover pulled over her face. It went to such an extent that all Devi had ever seen of her was an enormous plait,

which was draped along her bed like a dead snake; she imagined that she must look like the dying crusaders in Kanpur or Allahabad on the banks of the Ganga the place where souls can painlessly leave behind the burden of corporal sufferings. Devi was therefore startled when Prianka calmly said from the terrace where she was leaning out:

'The rains are easing off; the sun is on its way.'

But it was dark, all the signs pointed to a day that would resemble all the others, sombre and heavy with clouds. Vikram and Devi didn't dare move. They no longer knew whether to be distressed or of hopeful. Prianka herself seemed to hesitate for a moment, unsure, then gave them a large, warm smile which conveyed the simple pleasure girls of her age experience when going to bathe, or when putting on their jewellery to go to a gathering. But almost at once, her gaze wandered off into the distance, and followed the terraces of the village rising in stages along the hillside. Her shadow seemed to dissolve into the ochre of the low stone wall and Devi could only make out her profile, with the tiny golden nugget that shone in the hollow of her nose.

So, as Prianka turned again towards them, with the eyes of one who has already renounced this world, Devi eventually found the words to distance Vikram from the spirit of sadness and death:

'Get up Vikram; you have enough strength to walk. Come on, get up. Look, look down there, look at the water, the sun is running through the river once more...'



For Vikram like Devi, had always loved the river. The river had always given them everything as it had to all those born of the Mallahs; food, death, epidemics, harvests, rains and sands; The pleasure of bathing, the chore of washing, drownings; the willow of the nets, fish, the water that made the grain grow; the great, hot winds that rose from its beds and the cascades of the

monsoon that dampened it; the brothers, sons, cousins, uncles, friends from birth who crossed its waters since the beginning of time, the Thakur enemies whose evil eye fell on them as, they passed by in their small boats, watching from higher ground that they had seized from the Mallahs years and centuries ago; times long gone by but not forgotten, not as long as they lived. In the river waters every kind of bitterness and hope flowed. It was to the river that they offered garlands, and in which they cast the ashes, still warm, of the dead; it was to the river banks that they came to pray, curse, cast spells, mutter complaints or loathings. It was there too, on the edge of the river, the place preferred above all others, that they went year to year to savour the smallest of pleasures which, far more than greater ones, made them simply feel that it was good to be alive.

One of these small pleasures, in mid-July, was the watermelon. In the weeks leading up to the monsoon, Devi had spoken quite often about them. She said to Vikram, during the days when dust laden winds rose, when the mouth and throat were parched: 'I can't wait for the watermelon season, I can't wait to go and eat them at the water's edge!' She was like a real kid, and it moved Vikram each time. 'You will have your watermelons, don't be so impatient!' With this he started to laugh, seeing himself once again at the age of ten, pinching fruit in the fields with the other village children, and then eating them in a cove down by the river.

They could see the children coming, but they left them alone; it was their party, a ceremony, the rules of which they believed to have invented, though it was in fact the same all over the Valley. First of all they had to gather the watermelons without being seen. Then they brought them down to the river, put them into a net and cooled them for at least an hour in the river. They had to be patient, that was the secret of this feast: to learn that there is no pleasure without patience. Finally, they pulled the watermelons out of the water. Those who had knives sliced the watermelon, removing the pips in the water with the same gestures as a priest. They too were the first ones to bite into the flesh, to stuff themselves with it until they were no longer

thirsty. Then, when they couldn't eat anymore, they would begin their fights, to smear each other with the translucent pulp that shimmered in the sunshine, to throw the peels at each other's heads; and as usual, everything ended up in the water.

It was the greatest of childish pleasures, as soon as the hot spells began; in fact, each time Devi talked about watermelons before the monsoon, she reverted to childish words : 'Last year we were lost in the mud, we missed the watermelon season...' She drooled greedily thinking about it; just talking about it made her forget what had happened during the recent troubled days; she could already see it, the watermelon of her dreams! Devi was like that: passionate, greedy; her instincts were those of joy which she always tried to share.

Nevertheless, when Vikram became cheerful once more, she hadn't immediately thought of watermelons. The only thing she wanted was for him to walk again. She said to herself that each step he took was progress for her too, her own small step towards happiness. As soon as she saw the first ray of sunshine, she enticed him onto the terrace and uncovered his wound. Each day it dried up a little more and Vikram recovered his confidence. He began by surveying the horizon, hobbling between the courtyards; so in fact she didn't have too much trouble in persuading him to walk down to the river.

They went slowly, cautiously; they didn't leave the Mallah quarter and didn't overdo it; they went from one side street to another, choosing their hour carefully, often at midday when there were sunny spells; they never stayed for long down there. They sat on the parvis of the Hanuman temple a place only frequented by Mallahs. There they watched the comings and goings for a while of the ferrymen's small boats, the women crouched over their mounds of washing, the animals, the children wriggling about in the ponds waterlogged by the showers, the old people weaving garlands to offer the gods in gratitude for the benefits of the rains. From one day to the next, the rain became less miry. Although the river continued to wash along the branches and the corpses of animals, thin crescents of fresh sand began to fill out the river banks, inviting them to

bathe. However, Vikram was uneasy. The minute he heard the drone of an engine, he sprang up, constantly on his guard. Soon after. Without warning, he suddenly stood up, sullenly, and said : 'Come on, we are going back up.' From time to time he added : 'I can't wait to run again!'

Devi knew all along that it wasn't simply the police he was afraid of. He was also afraid that the Singh brothers would track them down during their visits to the Hanuman temple. When his gaze left the river, it was always to glance at the ochre-tinted walls of the Thakur quarter, its maze of solid houses often decorated with the paintings of great battle scenes. One morning Devi ventured to ask him: 'The other day...do you know who shot you?' He evaded her question. She realised that he suspected one of the band, especially as he hadn't had any news of his men. But in spite of all this, hope proved to be stronger than doubt; Vikram wanted to walk, to run, to regain his strength and his faith.

Events seemed to prove him right, for two days later, Lukka turned up at Barelal's house. He was wearing a driver's uniform that was three sizes too big for him, carrying the logo of a petrol company, a cherub with plump thighs that spat out flames. Kalla and Kok followed him, in the same comical get-up, probably stolen during an attack on Highway 2. It was enough to see them crossing the threshold of the house with the movements of lost wild cats, to smell the humid earth, and hear them explain how all the roads had been cut off for more than ten days, for Vikram to recover his energy. Listening to the tale of their last raid, he felt as though he were resuming a familiar life; he felt the band spirit taking hold of him again as Lukka related how the men had taken shelter in a refuge that was only known to him, grottos dedicated to the devi, where they remained without food for almost a week.

Efficient as always, Barelal immediately offered lentils, vegetables, tea and a few boxes of powdered milk. He also added that in a few days time he would be able to provide them watermelons.

Up until this moment, Devi had said nothing; she had let

the men talk endlessly, but without losing a word of what was said. However, as soon as Barelal mentioned of watermelons, she ceased listening so attentively. In a moment she became a child again, interrupted Lukka and exclaimed without the slightest reservation:

'You have watermelons! And you said nothing to me about them...'

'I grow everything in my little field. Except...'

'Where is your field?'

Barelal seemed embarrassed, and made a vague gesture. At the same time he saw Devi's eyes narrowing and so continued:

'I don't know if they are ripe yet.'

'Where is your field?' Devi persisted.

Barelal turned towards the terrace and limply pointed to the river banks, and the limits of the Mallah quarter:

'Just there.'

'She looked carefully at the spot he was pointing to not taking her eyes off it, even almost forgetting to say good-bye to Lukka and the two others as they were leaving. Naturally, the following morning, instead of going as far as the parvis of the temple, she dragged Vikram off to the watermelon field.

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All the same, to get down there was no easy task. At the last minute, Barelal changed his mind. He tried to stop them from going, stroked his moustache and his sagging belly, as he always did when he wasn't sure of himself, and muttered: 'You are going to be disappointed; my watermelons aren't ripe!' 'You must be joking!' Devi retorted. 'One or two of them are bound to be ripe...' Barelal's face darkened; he began to finger the hair on his stomach underneath his half-open shirt. In a tone intended to be authoritative, he went on: 'Vikram, take some watermelons if you want, but come up and eat them here.' 'But we aren't children!' Devi shrieked.—As if this fuss about watermelons wasn't childish! Barelal continued to grumble. Devi

just didn't want to listen. She planted herself in front of him, and viewed him contemptuously 'And why can't we stay down there, as we have done every other day? I am wearing a sari, Vikram, his Mallah clothes. Why? Can you tell me that?'

Despite his forty years and his little paunch, Barelal lost any poise he had left, especially when he saw her pinching Vikram's arm, on the verge of uncontrollable laughter: 'As for you, what have you promised your uncle now; tell me, what have you been up to behind my back?' Vikram stood in awkward silence, gave a wry smile, then answered: 'The field is open. We can be seen from every angle.' 'Yes, but we can be seen from the temple too!' she shot back at him, and with this she pushed him into the courtyard.

She had annoyed Barelal to such an extent with this gesture, that he pulled a hair right out of his stomach; he started to grouch once more: 'The Thakurs never come to visit the Hanuman temple. But if ever they see you in my field...' She laughed into his face. 'But we are dressed the same as everyone else! No one knows us here!—No one!' 'I wouldn't be so sure about that' Barelal grumbled. 'Who?' Vikram cut in instantly. 'Are people talking? Are you afraid?' Barelal sighed. 'No one knows you, that's true. But you never know. That's all: you just never know.'

His forehead and neck were soaked with perspiration, but he didn't dare wipe it away; he was well aware that he hadn't yet won the argument, as Devi continued to stare at him insolently, mockingly. In reality this wasn't the case; and as this look darkened with each passing moment, Barelal pulled yet another hair—out of his moustache this time—and exclaimed abruptly: 'Go on, hurry up. Go and get your watermelons. But come back quickly, and eat them here.'

Devi almost told him that it was ridiculous, as all the pleasure of watermelons was in eating them down by the river. However, she chose to say nothing, she had another idea; Vikram's face was a sight for sore eyes when they passed the corner of the first side-street and she produced a wicker net and a knife from underneath her sari. 'Where did you get them from?' he said in a low voice. She burst out laughing. 'Prianka gave them to me.'

She had them under her bed. She would have liked so much to come with us. But it doesn't matter; we will bring her back some...' She had softened, and raised her eyes towards the terrace where Prianka sometimes came and leaned out. This time Prianka wasn't there. So she carried on, suddenly rebellious once more: 'He your uncle, can say whatever he wants; we are eating the watermelons in the field.'

Vikram didn't answer. He was concentrating on walking without limping, on keeping up with the pace of her steps. Everything was going smoothly this morning. They had never walked down so quickly to the river. Vikram murmured to Devi: 'In a week's time I will be able to run. In a week's time, we are leaving.'

Everything went swimmingly at first. The watermelons were ripe. The mere fact of being proved right was already a pleasure in itself. Barelal's field was small, as were all those who belonged to the Mallahs, but it did lead straight onto the river. It stretched down the entire length of a cove, forming a perfect arc against which clear water flowed. Devi quickly wrapped two watermelons in the wicker net, and tied a long string around it which she then attached to her wrist. Then she plunged it into the bottom of the water. While waiting for them to cool, she lay down on the sand beside Vikram, and waited, twisting and turning.

They had been there barely ten minutes when Barelal appeared at the field. Devi heaved herself up onto her elbows, and shrieked: 'What is wrong with him, turning up here?' She knew perfectly well, so she pulled up the net, flung it onto the sands, let go the watermelons and took out her little knife. Then just as Barelal appeared she stood right in front of him, bit into the red flesh, without taking out the pips.

Juice streamed all over her, onto her cheeks and down her neck. Barelal walked past her, wordlessly, and approaching Vikram, shook him: 'Come on, come back up. You will be seen.' Vikram sighed, sat back and picked up a handful of sand which he slowly let fall through his fingers. Then he stood up, turned around and yawning, said to Devi in a low voice: 'Okay, we are going.'

She took her time washing her face, carefully enclosed the

fruit inside the net and then joined the two men, a wry smile on her lips, as when she judged that she had won a fight. Nonetheless, Barelal had also been victorious; he couldn't help but return her smile when she caught up with him. And at that moment there was suddenly such complicity between them that neither one noticed that Vikram wasn't following them anymore.

He had stopped. It was, perhaps, the brutal heat of a cloudless spell, the power of the new sun as the rains calm down; or perhaps his little snooze at the river had dulled his senses. In any case, he stopped—a few seconds, a minute, no one would ever know. It was only as Devi entered the village side streets that she realized something had happened. She returned to see him, frozen on the edge of the field, not very far away—fifty or sixty metres—right in the centre of the flat, bare part that extended between the river and the first set of walls. He had closed his eyes, drawn his hand across his forehead, as though wiping away perspiration. It was at that very moment that the shots were fired.

There were two, she remembered that quite clearly. Then she recalls the streams of blood that spurted from the length of his leg. Vikram collapsed; she could still hear herself screaming, as though the world had suddenly experienced a tragedy, as though in reply, there was only meant to be the echo off the high walls at the end of the Thakur quarter, clamouring, 'He is dead, he is dead.'



This cry, it was discovered later was what had saved him. Vikram wasn't dead. Barelal guessed that as he ran towards him. He was quite simply unconscious. Uncle Barelal behaved extraordinarily that day. It was as if he had been helping injured people all his life. He hadn't become tongue-tied, he hadn't pulled a single hair off his stomach, he hadn't hesitated or quibbled, hadn't said to Devi: 'It's all your fault; I told you what would happen', or

even: 'Who shot him?' From the beginning he had known what he must do; like the day Kalla and Plaza had come to ask him if he would hide his nephew. He gently lifted up the bloody fabric of Vikram's loincloth, discovered the wound—in the shin this time—; he ripped his shirt to make a tourniquet out of it. Then he had asked some of the men who had been running about in the Mallah quarter to help him carry Vikram into the shelter of the back streets; it was only there, once they got behind the walls, that he spoke to Devi. 'Run ahead,' he ordered. Ask my sons to call a doctor.' She inquired: 'The herbalist?' 'No, a doctor, he answered. 'My sons will know which one.'

Less than half an hour later, as Vikram was gaining consciousness , a young man with a tense expression arrived in Barelal's house, dressed like a townsman and carrying a doctor's bag. Barelal sat him down before a glass of tea, and Devi could hear much palaver going on. The uncle concluded by throwing down several wads of rupees on the mat that separated them. The doctor shook his head, his face becoming increasingly inscrutable. Barelal placed more notes in front of him. The man counted and re-counted them, even passing the new bills under the lamplight to verify the watermark, then he carefully folded them and put them into the bottom of his doctor's bag. He finally condescended to turn towards Vikram's bed. A stove to boil water on was brought, he prepared some linen and stretched Vikram out on the table. After this, everything happened very quickly; Vikram scarcely had time to let out a few groans. The smell of medicines was strong; a brief splintering of a glass syringe before the hurricane lantern; and the red steel of tweezers across the flame of the stove. A few minutes later, the bullet extracted from the skin rolled into the centre of the linen and the man expressed a mutter of satisfaction.

As soon as the bandaging was complete, he put away his bag. Vikram, he announced, would sleep for at least half a day. Then he whispered in Barelal's ear: 'He should be able to walk again, but try to have some X-rays done. You never know. Maybe the bone had been hit. He added for Devi's benefit: 'As for you, take advantage of the fact that he is asleep to take him away.'

Half an hour later, his advice had been carried out. Yet again, Baralel took care of everything. He came up with the place where their new refuge should be: Unnao, a large Mallah village situated on the other bank, upstream, and where one of his daughter-in-laws had relatives. Between the river and the gorges, he confided, was a small track onto which only nomads ventured during the rainy season. If they travelled as they did, in a horse and cart, they wouldn't be noticed. He knew an old man, just behind the hill, who would lend them one of his yokes. His eldest son would drive. As a precaution, they would hide Vikram under the jute bags. He would be a little shaken but wouldn't feel anything, or very little, because of the anaesthetic. By the time he woke up, they would already be at the ferryboat, opposite Unnao.

Devi was lost for words. Once more, others were making decisions for her. Unless it was in fact the gods, or destiny. Whatever the case was, all she could do was yield. She had no more energy left, no more self-confidence; no desire and very little hope.

In no time at all, she had tied up their bundles. She crossed the threshold of the room, and as they wrapped up Vikram with sacks, she noticed that, in spite of her total panic, she had brought back the lobster pot and the watermelons. She wanted to keep her promise to Prianka and give them to her. She thought Prianka was asleep. Devi came she into the room and she sat down on her bed. 'Here is your share,' muttered,' showing her the lobster pot.' Prianka smiled; she was still as beautiful as ever. But she was too weak to speak; to show her gratitude, she simply caressed the basket. Her gaze escaped in the direction of the terrace, and then settled on the opposite bank of the river. Prianka blinked as though dazzled, and whispered: 'Your husband will be happy, on the other side. No more Thakurs, no more Mallahs. Just the truth, the fundamentals. Tell him to come and see me. He will be so happy...'

It was the first time that Devi had ever heard her speak at such length and she was completely taken aback. For a moment she thought that Prianka was talking about the other bank of

the river. 'I will tell him, I promise you, 'she answered. It's true; you are right, we will certainly be better off over there. And I swear to you, we will come back and see you.'

With this she cut her a slice of watermelon which she slipped between Prianka's lips. At the same time, Barelal entered the room to tell her that the horse and cart was waiting behind the hill. He was nervous once more; he was perspiring, and pulled at the hairs of his moustache. Prianka dropped the piece of watermelon which had left a long red trace around her mouth. Devi didn't dare wipe it clean. In fact, Barelal was already pushing her into the courtyard, into the side-streets. He was running rather than walking as was his eldest son, just in front of him. His back was straining under the weight of Vikram, wrapped in jute like the carcass of a dead animal about to be cut up on the market.

It was an escape, this departure from Rajpur, a shameful, solitary, escape. On the other side of the hill, just where the track began, the owner of the horse and cart was waiting for them, hidden between the thornbushes. He threw them an arrogant look; as they were leaving, Devi saw Barelal handing over wads and wads of notes, as he had done with the doctor. She had wanted to pay her respects to Barelal, and had stuttered a few words of gratitude. He interrupted her pulled a short strand of hair from underneath her veil, and said in a low voice, as though he were speaking to a little girl: 'Look after him.' She immediately stiffened and haughtily retorted: 'Warn the men. Tell them where their leader is.'

He didn't answer. He simply helped her to get into the cart. The whip was lashed, and the horse started to trot. She turned around, but Barelal and the old man had already left, striding towards the other side of the hill. Down below, beside the river, the clear afternoon light continued to wash over the enormous Thakur quarter. It warmed the ochre of its walls, draining them of all substance , leaving only empty shells. Prianka's remark came to mind, and she wondered for a moment what was awaiting her on the other bank, there where, according to the young girl, the fundamentals of life lay.

From top to bottom, there was unanimous satisfaction in the police hierarchy of Uttar Pradesh when the rumour of Vikram Mallah's death started to spread. At the same time, the report that announced the news gave very little detail on the circumstances that surrounded it. There was only one thing that was stated categorically: the murderers were the Singh brothers. They had been spotted the day before the murder in the market town of Rajpur, where Vikram had been gunned down. They had been noticed because of a woman of a lower caste—very beautiful, for all that—who had followed them like their shadow. These same informers affirmed that the Singh brothers had travelled the length and breadth of the country before discovering where Vikram Mallah was hiding. The woman, however, had travelled even further to track down the twins. For as long as the Thakurs could remember, they had never seen a girl, even of the lower castes, so obsessed by the madness of evil.

In the two neighbouring States that bordered the river, these titillating facts were the high point of the policemen's satisfaction; especially in Uttar Pradesh where they had been under much pressure following questioning in Parliament after the attacks on Highway 2. They felt that this news would shake the confidence of the other gang leaders and bring into question the loyalty of their men. One thing was certain, Vikram's murder at the hands of the Singh brothers sealed the resumption of conflict between Thakurs and Mallahs in the countryside. Brawls among the peasants, as well as other murders, could be expected; maybe even massacres. But at least it was a return to real, good combat of the poor versus the rich, the strong versus the weak, the age-old fight between those who had land and those who didn't anymore; a reassertion, so to speak, of the old order of things. By confusing age, castes, conditions, in their gangs, the bandits had upset everything. That was another reason why they were execrable.

That is how, in any case, the plump Mr. Jain decided to start

off again. It was a rainy evening in July 1980, before the ritual reception of the last Saturday of each month, on the veranda of the Inspector General, at this time of the year laden with pots of orange-red rose bushes. Mahendra listened indifferently. He allowed Jain to develop his theories, to come back, perspiring, to other considerations and quibbles, and then he poured him a cup of tea, in a superb silver service from Sheffield, which must have been made in the thirties; then he allowed an interminable silence to fall.

Jain became exceedingly disconcerted. All the members of the hierarchy in front of whom he had practiced before coming to Mahendra's home, had warmly congratulated him on the accuracy of his views. He had repeatedly gone over the words he had just pronounced and now searched for the most minute flaw in his arguments that could explain this tacitness on the part of Mahendra. Try as he might, he couldn't find anything, apart from the fact that the death of Vikram Mallah had been announced on the strength of one police report coming from the Rajpur police station.

In his confusion, Jain began to hope that he would talk about another case. He had just begun to list off the files that concerned him, when Mahendra said with superb indifference:

'Show me the photograph of this Vikram Mallah, so that I can see what he looks like.'

He continued to contemplate his circle of statues, a distant expression on his face. From the bottom of his armchair, Jain didn't move an inch.

'I would like see what kind of man he is,' Mahendra insisted.

And as Jain remained dumbfounded, he brusquely turned towards him, his eye gleaming with irony:

'Simple curiosity. He made life difficult for us, don't you think?'

'Yes, certainly. But...'

'I didn't see this photo in the file, Mahendra interrupted him. 'I presume you forgot to attach it. Or that you kept it for yourself. The death of this bandit seems to make you so happy...'

Jain too, wanted to sit erect in his armchair, to imitate the

elegant posture of his superior. But he didn't possess his easy manners, shifted a little too abruptly, and knocked the cup of tea over with his elbow. Some of the hot liquid split onto his shirt.

Nonchalantly, Mahendra went on, Just a thought: maybe there was no photo in the file?

Jain didn't have the heart to answer him. In any case, Mahendra had already made the point he had wanted to make at the outset, and so continued dryly:

'No photo, no body. No body, no dead person.'

He ventured in a dull voice :

'In the report...'

He didn't have the energy to finish his sentence. Anyway, Mahendra didn't give him the chance to do so. He suddenly dropped the stem of his rose bush and threw his head back before flinging out these few decisive words:

'Only one report is valid; that the investigation committee will establish after you have sent it tomorrow morning to Rajpur, to find out exactly how this 'supposed murder' took place, and what happened to the 'supposed corpse.'

'You should have seen the way he said 'supposed murder' and 'supposed corpse,' Jain recalls. He was cold, almost inhuman; it was so typical of Mahendra. He hadn't really been the same again since the attacks on Highway 2. In fact, his wife had told mine that he didn't sleep anymore, and that to distract himself, he spent entire nights rereading Shakespeare. It must be added, that the Chief Minister was hounding him. He never gave him a moment's peace, calling him from the most out of the way places. When it wasn't him, it was his Chief Secretary. The elite was getting nervous because of the elections... To win votes, they were ready to do anything. They wanted to either kill or put behind bars as many bandits as they could. Even if it was only to deprive their opponents of the pleasure, the day they took over. For just one moment, that evening, a note of warmth crept into the severe voice of the Inspector General. He casually let drop to Jain: 'I want you to find me a photo of the girl too.'

Flabbergasted by this final demand, that appeared to be more

of a petition than an order in the way it was expressed, Jain retorted humorously that the Bandit Queen was no longer a subject of discussion; they didn't know if she was dead or alive. Mahendra then gave an unbelievable answer, Jain continued, an incredible answer from a man who, five minutes earlier, gave the impression of being reason itself. He let his orange-red rosebush go, straightened himself up and answered him with complete certainty: 'She isn't dead, but I want a photo.'

## *61*

The Deputy Inspector General Jain, always becomes truculent when he is asked about this period at the end of July 1980. He had, however, decided as an additional precaution, to himself lead the investigation committee on the murder of Vikram Mallah. However, on the day he left, the monsoon resumed more violently than ever. It took him more than three days to reach Rajpur in the rickety Ambassador, provided him by the government.

The enormous Thakur market town now loomed behind his wind-screen, coiling around the side of a hill in the loop of the river. Simply glancing into the side-streets, he could see that it wasn't going to be easy to conduct the inquest. On seeing his car, the villagers stiffened, a scornful expression on their faces. In the depths of their eyes lay centuries of cunning violence. Jain, who had lived all his life in the town, had to acknowledge this, although he was ignorant of the reasons.

He was expecting to have some respite in the bungalow where the head of the local police had put him up; on the telephone, he had described it as a miniature palace. Of course, he should have known. It was only a fragile cement building with mildewed partitions, full of mosquitoes and also infested with rats. To top it all, the curry served by the caretaker of the bungalow for dinner had made his two companions sick. Jain had to proceed alone. At the end of day one of his investigations, he no longer felt the slightest regret. The impression he had

received the day before proved very quickly to be the right one: no one, not even a sleuth from Delhi or Calcutta, could find out any more information than the local police already had gathered. There was no shortage of witnesses to confirm that Vikram Mallah had been shot down in front of his uncle's field, down by the river. At the same time, not a single villager would agree to speak about the victim or about the woman who was accompanying him. As for the supposed murderers, as soon as their names were brought up, jaws became set, faces turned away. Jain didn't succeed in dragging out of any of the Thakurs, the name of the Singh brothers.

Naturally, the uncle of the victim chose to take the other side. It didn't make Jain's task any easier: Barelal Mallah was a benign, ineffectual sort of man, who was rarely open to criticism because he never denied anything. He admitted quite easily that he had given his nephew shelter for two weeks, the length it took for a small infection of the leg to mend—nothing serious, he said following a snake bite. He also claimed to know nothing about him being a bandit, before the morning he was gunned down in the field of watermelons. So Jain asked him what had become of the girl who had followed him everywhere. Barelal Mallah carelessly pointed in the direction of the hill : 'She escaped after the murder, we didn't see her after that.' 'Was it his wife?' Jain questioned him. Barelal became more suave than ever: 'That's what he told me.' Jain pretended to be surprised: 'Did you believe that? ' Barelal wasn't taken in by this, and answered with a wry smile: 'I had to believe it. He was my nephew, after all. I haven't seen him since he was a child...'

Despite his expressionless voice and flexible stance, Barelal Mallah knew exactly in which direction he was going. For the moment Jain asked him more precise questions on his nephew's murder, he hardened and didn't even wait for Jain to ask him to point to the culprits—the Singh brothers, as he had expected. With much wailing he told him all about the murder. But there again, throughout this lyrical tale, he made a long digression concerning his nephew's blood which, if we are to believe him, flowed into the juice of the watermelon and mingled with it.

Jain found his grief a little spineless. Behind his tears was something formless, something sluggish that sounded like whining. As a result, Jain felt within his rights to ask for something that could have appeared out of place a week after such a violent murder, and especially during the monsoon, when during which decomposition is particularly rapid: he asked to see the body. Barelal was majestic: he didn't fall into the trap. He immediately put an end to his whining, and became stiff and solemn. He admitted to Jain, with the dignity of a patriarch exhausted by tragedy, that he hadn't been able to pay his respects to his nephew as duty demanded : the Thakurs, he sighed, had only just shot Vikram down when they flung themselves on his corpse and threw it into the river, where it was instantly swallowed up by the backwash.

The Doms, backed up this version. No one had handed over a Mallah corpse the week before. The Thakurs confirmed it in their own way, using non-committal sentences and sharp glances laden with hostility. When Jain asked them a second time if it was true that the famous Singh brothers had stayed in their village the day before the murder, and whether the rumour that they were the murderers, was true, he was faced with a heavy silence.

He thought of stronger methods to make them talk, but then dismissed the idea. His investigation had exhausted him, and he was shrewd enough to realise that he already had the answer. If the Singh brothers had been innocent, the Thakurs would have vehemently defended them, and cleared them of all suspicion straightaway.

Having come to this rather disconcerting conclusion, he returned to the police bungalow. The showers had begun again, it was too late to leave. So he preferred to tackle the report requested by Mahendra. He began by scrupulously recording the answers of all the witnesses, accompanied by some rather naive comments about the roughness of the country and the law of silence that governed it. Out of these trivialities, he tried, without much hope, to give substance to the investigation, which as the night advanced, took shape as a complete fiasco. To begin

with, he wasn't bringing back a photo. Then he had discovered nothing new concerning the 'girl.' All the new information that had been gleaned concerned the other woman in the whole business, Kusumana, the mistress of the two brothers, and he was sceptical about how appealing this would be to the puritanical mind of the Inspector General. As Kusumana was of the lower castes, the Thakurs hadn't hesitated in making salacious comments about her. The women had proved to be even more vicious than the men: as soon as Jain had mentioned her name they had hurled the worst kind of insults that he had ever heard. Some muttered that they had seen her training behind the hill on the morning of the murder—they, as much as accused her of the assassination of Vikram Mallah. Judging by these pleasantries, it was obvious that Kusumana was beautiful, and that she had also warned the police in Rajpur. But no one knew what had happened to her, any more than to the two brothers; and afraid that Jain wouldn't push on with his investigations, they thought fit to add that she had followed them.

Jain finished his report with a conclusion he hoped would divert his boss' obsessive mind into another channel of thought. As far as he was concerned, Vikram Mallah was killed by the Singh brothers with the complicity of their common mistress, Kusumana, who also apparently aspired to being a female bandit.

Following his return to Kanpur, Jain thought he had perhaps won this hazardous bet, but the Inspector General didn't make a single remark on reading his report. Something even more unexpected was, that the day after his return, two volumes of The Archeological Gazetteer's reappeared on his desk. A short while after, his wife told him that Mrs Mahendra had just poured out her various and latest grievances against her husband; among them, the fact that he had secretly bought himself two new desert bermudas, as well as the latest maps of the Indian Atlas, a sure sign that it wouldn't be long before he resumed his solitary Sunday expeditions to the depths of the jungle. Boosted by this knowledge, and by what he could gather from the routine at the office, Jain deduced that all the Inspector General was thinking

about, apart from everyday administration, was his lost cities.

In this total state of apathy, on 1 August 1980, the Inspector General of Kanpur recorded the news that three of Vikram Mallah's band had been arrested in Etawah. For once, the statement gave the names of the gangsters, their age, their caste—they were all Mallahs—and their birthplace. If the gang had split up, it allowed the author of this report to elicit the fact that their leader was dead. In any case, he had thoroughly questioned the three bandits on this very subject. Following some resistance, which had seemed to him to be purely a matter of form, the bandits confirmed the death of Vikram Mallah. Yet again, the document didn't contain a single word about the girl. However, Mahendra didn't bring up the subject, and Jain did everything he could to avoid it. Listlessness pervaded the offices of the Inspector General once more.

That is, until the dreadful afternoon of 3rd August, when a tired office boy came and placed a very long telegram on Jain's desk. It was signed by the head of police in Rajpur. Barelal Mallah had recently lost his niece; all his family had come to the cremation. In the crowd that had accompanied the body to the cremation ground some Thakurs had recognized his nephew disguised as a lorry driver. They had also caught a glimpse of the girl.

## *62*

Mahendra's anger was something akin to that of the gods in the sacred books: to begin with, slow, distant, reptilian; then violent, a brief, irrefutable squall. He had waited two hours before notifying Jain, having chosen to contact the police in Rajpur first. An hour and a half later, as his secretary still hadn't managed to contact them, he finally sent his message on transmitter and ordered them to come to his office there and then, leaving them no time to ponder.

He had then handed Jain the original of the telegram, smiling as he watched it slowly dawn on him that the cremation had

taken place forty-eight hours after he had left Rajpur. It implied that Vikram Mallah had been in hiding not far from there—maybe even in the village, or in his uncle's house, in the very place that Jain had interrogated Barelal. Mahendra hissed,—'In fact, I didn't see anything about this niece in the report that you made on your return; you obviously didn't question or see her, in fact you didn't search Barelal Mallah's house at all. You weren't even aware of the fact that there was an invalid under his roof, and that a young girl died within a day; that they brought her body for cremation with pomp and ceremony, with a gang leader waving garlands among the tambourine players...'

Mahendra didn't vituperate. He hurled accusations at him, never straying from his slow drone. He simply accentuated a syllable now and again in a grating tone or drummed on the telegram with his long, bony fingers. But when his secretary placed the evening papers on his desk, he had great difficulty controlling his bitterness. The main news was the miraculous resurrection of Vikram Mallah, ironically presented as though it were a scoop, in big headlines using ingenuously sensational terms reminiscent of the worst kind of detective stories from the previous century: 'FOR ONCE, IT IS THE VICTIM WHO HAS RETURNED TO THE SCENE OF THE CRIME ...', 'THE REINCARNATION OF THE KING OF BANDITS .' One hack had even dared to run this vulgar headline 'THE GHOST OF THE VALLEY.' Others had taken the trouble to employ a more intellectual approach but it wasn't any less offensive for that: 'HELPLESS POLICE FACED WITH PROVOCATION FROM GANGSTERS.' 'THE ROGUE OF HIGHWAY TWO OPENLY SCOFFS THE GOVERNMENT OF UTTAR PRADESH...'

This exaggerated journalese sickened Mahendra. What irritated him more than anything else was the fact that it reached the press before he himself had even been informed. He understood exactly how this had happened. Aware of his unusual personality, the Rajpur police had sold the information to the journalists who had offered the most money, guaranteeing exclusivity to each one, as was often the case. It was only when

their pockets were full that they decided to inform the Inspector General of this mysterious new development.

Jain no longer dared to move in his chair. For at least half an hour he was reduced to listening to Mahendra, alternatively commenting on the telegram and the newspaper, in a voice that became increasingly cold. Outside, like a reflection of the storm that was brewing in the office, the sky began once again its discharge, a small, puddle spreading under the garden door. For all that, Jain's torture wasn't over yet. He was subjected to a telephone conversation that lasted half an hour, during which he could only make out the answers, Mahendra's cold monosyllables in the midst of the static, punctuating the never-ending sentences of his caller. The ultimate insult inflicted on Jain was to hear, on his hanging up, the train of events that had followed his departure, and this straight from the Inspector General's lips.

Mahendra conveyed all this in short, curt sentences, colourless, typical of a senior civil servant who didn't have the slightest inkling as to what Rajpur could possibly be like, any more than about the other villages in the Valley. Barelal Mallah's niece, he revealed, had died the very day Jain had arrived. Four days later, on the morning of the cremation, Vikram Mallah had been seen in the procession around the ghats, holy steps where the funeral pyre had been mounted. He had mingled with a group of children, then with the musicians. What had stood out about him was the fact that he was limping. His outfit had also astonished everyone—a lorry driver's uniform with a cap that covered his eyes and a suit bearing a large yellow and red emblem, of a cherub spitting fire.

'That is the trade mark of Indian Union Petroleum,' Jain ventured. 'Several of the lorries attacked on the Highway belonged to this company and...'

'It doesn't matter,' Mahendra cut in.

'What strikes me is that for once, the Mallahs and the Thakurs have exactly the same version of what happened. They all say that Vikram Mallah is alive. And do you know why he showed himself in public?'

'His cousin's death... Family duty, to thank his uncle for having looked after him and accommodating him...'

Mahendra screwed up his face:

' A young girl whom he saw for maybe two weeks out of his entire life ... If he took such a risk, it is more likely that he had things he wanted to bring into the open.'

He straightened himself up in a comical manner under the neon light and continued with increasingly deeper inflexions, which brought to mind Shakespearian actors:

'If Vikram Mallah showed himself in Rajpur, it is because the very idea that we could think him dead, drove him mad. The journalists are right; he came to scoff at the Thakurs. That is why the version of both the Mallahs and the Thakurs correspond. That is also why everyone testified, for once. The Mallahs are proud of what Vikram Mallah did. The Thakurs, on the other hand, feel insulted by him. If there had been ...'

He trailed off, apparently dazed by what he was uttering, by what he was predicting—the unrealistic hope that the war between the castes had finally reached the core of the gangs and would be their downfall. He wryly smiled as he said:

'There will be a follow-up to all this.'

Jain reckoned that this outburst had definitively come to an end, and that he could risk asking a question that had been on the tip of his tongue since Mahendra had hung up:

And the girl?'

Knowing it was a perilous move, he had spoken in a subdued voice. The Inspector remained speechless. Jain thought he hadn't quite understood the question and repeated it a little louder:

'Did Vikram Mallah appear in the company of the girl?

'Leave the girl out of this!' Mahendra choked, withdrawing behind his desk and peevishly pushing away his two worn volumes of the Archeological Gazetteer. He added in a strangled voice: 'Of course she came! Well in fact, we don't really know; some people saw her, others didn't. What difference do you think it makes to me!'

He threw back his head and screwed up his eyes. Then, he recoiled in the same way as cobras do before spitting out their

venom; hissing as he had done at the beginning of their conversation, he said:

'The lowly policemen of Rajpur did your work for you. At least they were able to find the Singh brothers, despite their boorish methods. They are in Damanpur, thirty miles upstream. Try to redeem yourself by coming up with some ideas as to what we can get out of these two rogues. Make sure you are at my disposal day and night. I am waiting patiently for your suggestions.'

He broke off, Then he stipulated in a dull voice:

'No reports. Nothing in writing.'

## *63*

What Mahendra had dreaded on reading the newspapers became a reality: the simple power of imagination had made Vikram Mallah, the King of the Valley within a few days. He could be seen everywhere. The news had spread to every nook and cranny of the gorges, dazzling and exalting, lifting a weight from the souls of the reprobates, the feverish, the intoxicated. A man had come, rebellious and violent, scorned ordinary justice, the same justice that breaks the will of the poor and only serves to magnify the pomposity of the rich. He had started by upsetting the normal flow of everyday life; he had the nerve to defy the Thakurs and the policemen nicknamed jackals. He had paid the price, had been wounded; they had wanted to kill him. He had died and had immediately been resurrected, as some heroes in the Old Testament had been. He had been as far as the City of Yama, had approached him but its severe god had sent him straight back to the Valley in order to complete his work in the land of the living. He had become Vikram the Great Ghost, worthy of long lyrics, and Monarch of the Humiliated. Man or spirit, it made no difference, as he was only there to do good, to render justice to those who wear themselves out on the thankless land, and curse those who steal their bread from them!

Mahendra, the Inspector General, was only too aware of all

this. It wasn't only the lower castes who were gripped by this spate of tales. In spite of the strict order of silence he had imposed on all State policemen since he had received the telegram, he had been unable, however, to curb the enthusiasm of the Delhi journalists for the whole affair. The national dailies had put the story to good use, as they had done the month before with Pan Singh Tomar. It had been discussed on the television in exactly the same way, employing almost identical expressions: 'The Lord of the Valley remains elusive.' 'The police helpless following, the bizarre resurrection of a new Bandit King.' Alarmed by this stream of sensational events, and unable to keep them in check, Mahendra became an insomniac. Where could he search, he moaned to himself throughout his sleepless nights. Who could he interrogate in this Valley with thousands of villages, and in each of these villages, hundreds of houses? Not taking into account the crevasses the grottos, unknown dens, burrows, snake furrows down which bandits could so easily slide; in the gorges, they were stronger even than the very animals that inhabited them, more supple than the cobra, more despicable than the most despicable of jackals... He could only see one possible solution to end this infernal drama, the one he had suggested to Jain the day the telegram had arrived.

For three days now, Jain had been avoiding him. As soon as he saw him at the end of the corridor, he ran and took refuge in his office, displaying the same terror as a rat at the bottom of a cesspool. Mahendra, never one for taking the plunge, had since taken an initiative which would sanction the weakness of his reasoning in the face of blatant savagery, the world of gangsters. But as the nights went by and his insomnia grew, he became desperate to find another way out. Worse still, he could see a new danger emerging, one which caused him even greater anguish than the pseudo-resurrection of Vikram Mallah: it was the keen interest spreading around the country in stories of the bandits. Although he tried to console himself with the fact that only wealthy families in the big towns had access to the television, and thus calculated the hoards of illiterates that surely populated the districts, he couldn't pretend that transistors

weren't two a penny throughout the Valley, and that there was not still at least one man, even in the tiniest village, to tell the others what was in the newspapers. What was incongruous was the fact that while these very newspapers and radios that broadcast into every hovel in the land, the merest snippet, whether it was a banal attack on the roadside, or a skirmish between Thakurs and Mallahs in an obscure hamlet, and provoked a storm of violence, because of them he had controlled that same violence with varying degrees of success since he been honoured with the post of Inspector General. All that because of what he reckoned to be India's greatest plague since time began: the imagination.

For three days, Mahendra bravely resisted the temptation to call Jain. But at the end of three entirely sleepless nights, he gave in. This was the hardest thing to bear. So as important as Mahendra may have been, during the night between the 7th and 8th August, he did something entirely out of character that relieved him, but at the same time made him feel slightly ashamed, given his birthright and noteworthy rank. He picked up the receiver and called Jain summoning him to come to his home within half an hour.

## *64*

For once their conversation was brief. It proceeded as though it was Jain who had requested this nocturnal meeting. As soon as he arrived, Mahendra brought him into the library, sat him down in front of his desk and awaited his explanations. After a few moments of awkward silence, Jain agreed to say a few words about the Singh brothers. But he began to ramble and Mahendra soon interrupted him:

'You know exactly where they are.'

' In Damanpur,' Jain sighed.

'That's where you want to go to bargain with them...'

Jain could, in normal circumstances, interpret the entire range of Mahendra's intonations, but this time it was impossible for

him to grasp whether his sentence was a supposition or a question. The thought of a clash with the Inspector General in the middle of the night exhausted him. He decided to say nothing. Mahendra coldly resumed his onslaught:

'I know that you would never do anything so stupid. The truth is, you are going to meet the Singh brothers here in Kanpur.'

'They will never come out of hiding!' Jain immediately exclaimed.

Mahendra condescended to give him a weary smile.

'You have the name of their arms dealer in your report. Start by paying him a visit. Negotiate the meeting with him. Then...'

He stood up, went out onto the veranda, and walked for a while around his rose plants before continuing:

'Ask him to arrange a meeting between you and the twins in his home. Pay him whatever he asks for, and he will comply. Once the brothers are there, you can make them an offer.'

Mahendra was talking to Jain in the same manner as astrologers interpret horoscopes, in a distant, detached voice, as though he had been disclosing to his subordinate what was written in the stars since time began. The outcome was that he was given orders, without any discussion, and within a few minutes everything had been decided.

They were to leave the girl out of the whole affair, she wasn't worth investigating; they would only concern themselves with Vikram Mallah. Jain would pay a visit to the Boss. He was restricted to dealing only with him, and with the utmost courtesy and patience, to avoid any violence on his part. As the Boss wasn't an idiot, he would immediately grasp the deal he was being offered. In any case, it was clear cut. In a nutshell, Vikram Mallah's hide for the Singh brothers freedom to do whatever they wanted, so long as it wasn't in the district of Kanpur. There were, however, two conditions that had to be scrupulously observed, otherwise their freedom would be brought into question. First of all, there were to be no blunders in the killing of Vikram Mallah. His body was to be presented to the police together with his guns. Secondly, whatever happened, the

complicity of the two parties must never be found out.

Mahendra had outlined this plan without looking at Jain, staring, from the terrace, at the few books that were scattered on his desk.

Now with a dismissive gesture, he signalled Jain that the discussion was over. Jain didn't move; he felt drained as he allowed his gaze to wander from the veranda to the office, onto the sagging bookshelves facing him, and out to the last glimpses of the garden being lit by the retreating moon. Once again, a gust lifted the pages of book, a Shakespeare tragedy, lying open on Mahendra's desk, and Jain read aloud the page that appeared.

'The sky is so heavy that it will not clear without a storm...'

'Yes, it is in King John,' Mahendra immediately retorted. 'But you should improve your accent. That isn't exactly the way it should be, pronounced.'

With that, he accompanied him to the gates of the villa.



This time it was Vikram who wanted to go down to the river. As was his habit he stared at the sky beyond the roof of leaves and said: 'It is going to be fine.' He then turned towards Devi and added: 'Soon the rains will be over.' It was true that as the days went on, for a week now there were more bright stretches. Because of this he suddenly had the desire to return to the river. The village was spread out along the lowest point of a very long stretch of cove, at the end of a vast area planted with sugar-cane. It was, in fact, more a series of shacks than an actual village. Everything was flat in Unnao, the streets looked like simple furrows, the houses with their roofs of leaves blended with the fields. There were only Mallahs in this lost little town.

Vikram felt protected as soon as he arrived. This few loyal men had joined him there, Lukka, Kalla, Attu, little Kok. They lived in the same house as himself and Devi, and patrolled in relays. The rest of the men were scattered all over the gorges, although they had all sworn to rejoin the gang once the

monsoon ended. Then there was the air in Unnao, the wind that came up from the river, light and constant, which played on the light as soon as the sun shone. The eye went out of focus, wandered among the shimmering waters and the slow shudder of the leaves polished by the rains, the whole being drenched underneath a shower of droplets.

Vikram said he couldn't have been cured anywhere else. As if to prove this, his wounds healed very quickly and he hardly limped anymore. However, he still slept a lot, sometimes right into the afternoon. When he got to the river, a quarter of an hour's walk away, he would only sit a short while, then go back to sleep again. Lukka and the other members of the gang were posted just beside him, guns aimed at the sugar-cane field, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

Devi sat by Vikram's side. When she was by the riverside, she kept a lookout for omens. Attu had taught her how to tell the time, and so she was constantly looking at her watch. All the same, she still sometimes figured it out by staring up at the sky. As soon as she saw the sun fading, she roused Vikram, and they went home.

He would certainly have slept until nightfall if she hadn't laid down the law. The escapade at Rajpur had exhausted him, although not as much as the rage he had flown into just the evening before when Barelal's eldest son had informed them of Prianka's funeral. He had let slip in the conversation the news that the entire Valley had given him up for dead. Be it Mallah or Thakur, policeman or bandit, they all believed that he had fallen to the bullets of the Singh brothers.

What followed had been terrifying. Vikram withdrew, his muscles stiffened, he screwed up his eyes; Devi thought she saw through their long dark slits a whole spectrum of anger. He must have been frightened, as he began to stroke his talisman. When he finally calmed down, he spat 'I am going back to Rajpur. I will appear beside the funeral pyre.' He spoke with such confidence that Devi hadn't raised any objections. Besides, he had followed up this statement by saying 'Don't worry. No one shoots ghosts.' 'I am not a ghost, but I will follow you anyway,'

Devi replied. Vikram hadn't shown any surprise. So on the appointed day of the ceremony, they set off, early in the morning, on the road leading from Unnao.

Devi has some difficulty remembering this trip back to Rajpur. She can only recall the terror that swept over her when she saw, once more, the high walls of the Thakur quarter. The procession had already begun on the banks, yards away from the ghats, the sacred steps where they were going to burn the body. So they ran across the maze of side-streets to catch up.

Vikram and Devi didn't stay very long. After a few words to Barelal, they left to go back to Unnao. Not a word passed between them before arriving at the small boat. Only when the cove of Unnao could be seen from the ferryman's boat, did Vikram finally speak—a strange sentence made up of mysterious words, the kind of phrase Prianka had often expressed during the couple of weeks they had been close to her: 'Look at the water, Devi. The monsoon is coming to an end. Time is flowing along with the river.' The next day he wanted to rest in the cove.

So on 13 August 1980, ten days after they had reappeared in Rajpur and then returned to Unnao, Vikram and Devi went down to the river. It was the same time as the day before, and the day before that: around midday when the clouds clear, when it is already hot; the moment when the sun begins once more to soak up the earth, and the entire village sleeps amidst the fields in which everything is growing and bursting forth, portraying a brief moment of unity between light and water.

On the path leading down to the river, Devi and Vikram walked alongside a small pond where kids splashed; behind Lukka and Kok with their machine-guns, were on the alert, and in front of were Kalla and Attu, who had also taken their rifles and loaded them. The children were naked and rubbed themselves with a bar of clear, pink soap, passing it from one to the other as if it were some treasure. Some of them were making bubbles with the aid of a straw, which drifted slowly above the lotuses, sending back a rainbow of colours which inevitably burst as they gazed at their blurred perfection.

Devi suddenly remembered the great waters where she had

played in the same way, below Sheikhpur Gura. She also remembered Kailash, the sands where they used to make love. She could even, for a brief moment see the pond at Maheshpur, her first husband's village. Fragments of what she calls, whenever she thinks about it, 'her former life.' When she looks back on it, it isn't with sadness, because Vikram is there right in front of her; she can hear his breathing, smell him, probably even hear the rhythm of his heartbeat. She repeated to herself as she had constantly done over the past few days that he would be cured before the end of the rains.

She raised her head and straightened her back. She had a strong desire to announce to the world—for example to the women lining the entire length of the fields, sagging under the weight of their pots of water as usual—that she, Devi, was the wife of the Great Vikram, he who feared nothing, neither the police nor the Thakurs. The one who everyone agreed the length and breadth of the Valley, had enough strength to go to the City of Yama again.

'Time flows with the river,' Devi echoed. In one or two weeks time, Vikram would be able to move about in the gorges; they could resume their life of adventure. She moved away from the tree, and sat down on the sand at the further end of the cove. She felt reassured, the men were guarding Vikram, their guns pointing in the direction of the road and the sugar-cane fields. For just one second, she kept her eyes open to watch the clouds scudding across the sky—slender wisps that rolled and unrolled, came together, broke apart, unravelled and then joined up again.

The world was calm, bereft of any signs. She closed her eyes, but inside her the light still persisted. She could describe everything that was happening around her—the rustling trees, the river, which depending on the wind, rippled against the banks in little thrusts. At the bottom of the clear waters, shoals of fish weaved among the small scallops of hard sand, their movements reflected in those of the river.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she heard the two shots being fired—close on each another, crisp, extremely

precise—she didn't get up immediately; she was completely paralyzed. She heard Lukka scream: 'Come over here, run!', and for one moment she didn't know where she was—a short moment, although filled with lengthy thoughts. She realized that she couldn't even run, because she was wearing her sari. Finally, she looked over towards the fields, from where Lukka's and Kalla's voices were coming, and saw the large, pliant stems of cane closing around their legs. As her gaze returned to the tree, she felt a pressure on her shoulders. A rag smothered her; a strange smell intoxicated her, acidic and entrancing. For one ecstatic moment, the world dropped its veil of illusion. It returned to what it might possibly represent for the gods, bare empty, dancing images. The cane that swayed in the wind called out frantically to the rains, the sun whirling, benign—she never knew it had a mouth. Those hard eyes, those strong arms that were tying her up, lifting her off the ground, before throwing her into the open pit that had replaced the river. No more smiles or noise. No more arms , water or sun—only the darkness...



What followed then cannot be easily expressed. It was something far beyond tears, possibly beyond pain. Something mute, which is destined to remain unknown.

At the same time, Devi was obliged to relate about the twenty-three days that had ensued. The day she chose to do so, she spoke about it unfeelingly, with sentences that made no impact, resembling the event itself, banal, devoid of all splendour. She sometimes allowed long silences to take over, then shook her head as if, before she could continue, she had to assess once again what had happened to her; as though she were repeating to herself: 'It's true, they actually went that far; it is unbelievable, but they did.' Before she could continue, she breathed in deeply, which dispelled for a brief moment the bitterness of her features.

To begin with, she saw herself by the banks of the river. The sun was about to set. She was lying on her stomach, her feet

and hands tied up when they threw her onto the humid sand, the coolth of which woke her up. She moved her head from one side to the other, like a baby in its crib. They turned her over, grasping her feet as if she were an old bag, and she found herself facing the sky. A face leaned into hers, and examined it. The eye was yellow, unclear; it belonged to Tool Box. He no longer looked brutish, and the confusion apparent on his face gave the impression that many ideas were rushing around in his head, leaving him incapable of choosing one of them.

She allowed her head to flop back to the side. She could smell the odour that had knocked her out, still in her clothes. She can't remember what it was called, but it reminded her of the hospital in Gwalior and her stomach operation. She felt heavy and exhausted; the world was still a shallow image. However, she had guessed that she was no longer in Unnao. Facing the setting sun, she could finally make out the high cliffs, the chain of muddy mountain peaks. Focussing more clearly, she recognizing close by, the huge red and black drinks dispenser, a gift from the Singh brothers, devotees of Kali.

So she must be in Behmai—or, more exactly, below Behmai. She didn't recognize this village, only gathered that it was very isolated, very small, and that Vikram had been there once before. It was after the attack on the Highway, when the twins' niece was to be given a dowry. Maybe he was up there. She was going to meet him, place her arm on his. If he was sick or hurt in any way, she would look after him again, she would sponge away the fever. If they intended to kill him, she would follow him in death.

She still didn't understand exactly what had happened and stared blankly at the black and red dispenser. The world started to become a little clearer. Then she was able to distinguish the walls of the temple, its veneer of multi-coloured tiling, the prints which hung in a circle around the Goddess. New faces leaned over her, she searched for Vikram's among them, unable to resist this temptation. But to no avail. A kind of laughter followed. Other faces pushed closer to hers at least ten, most of them unknown. After a few seconds, she recognized the Boss' pitted

face. He seemed calm, sure of himself. There was a very beautiful woman by his side, dressed in a red sari. She didn't take her eyes off Devi, eyes that were open wide with curiosity. She stood her ground, unmoving, her head raised a fraction too high, revealing a long standing repressed bitterness. Although she had only seen her once, over a year ago, from this trait alone, Devi recognized Kusumana.

She was just trying to order her thoughts, when Tool Box suddenly stopped frowning, threw himself on her, and freed her legs. Then he forced her to stand up. As she staggered, two men rushed to her side and took her by the shoulders. They then dragged her towards the steep path that lead to Behmai.

The woman slipped away. There were men both in front and behind her, a small, compact group that pushed and surrounded her. No one spoke. Now and again, some of them turned around to give her the same kind of greedy, delighted look Kusumana had given her. Devi understood then, that they had no intentions of letting her go.

Once more, Vikram's face flashed through her mind. She's immediately pushed it aside, and tried to remember the Guru's lessons, thinking only of her amulet, which bounced between her breasts. As they progressed along the rutted road she muttered something akin to a prayer. For once, the Nagamantra remained powerless. Her lips, not her soul, beseeched the strength of the Goddess to rise within her. Vikram's face remained a part of her petition as Devi hung on to a slender thread of hope.

The sun had still not set. The ridge of mountain peaks embellished both sides of the path with a saffron-yellow piping. The walk was painful and Devi was unsteady on her feet, to the point of almost collapsing. She hated these arms that supported her, that picked her up, with a passion.

Three quarters of an hour later, the group suddenly emerged onto an enormous square, which was built on a slope, with a well. Once there, the men began to shout and clamour attracting the entire village. There was so much screaming, so much laughter, that Devi understood nothing of what was being said.

She was pushed so violently to the bottom of a wide, empty space that she tripped and fell down. Again, she was picked up insulted, then pushed back yet again. When the mob had finally finished with her, Tool Box grabbed her around the waist and shoved her into a tiny shack, where she was locked up. She heard a man bellowing: 'Now we have her!' Another, whose voice was less vociferous, tried to outdo him: 'In less than no time! No one will ever be any the wiser.' Then a third boasted of stealing the potion that had made her unconscious, from a hospital in Kanpur. He cited its name. It was complicated, but Devi swore that she would remember it. The man was very proud of himself, and wanted to tell his story a second time. But he was interrupted by Tool Box; she was certain it was him, she recognized his sharp, reedy voice; 'Mallah dog! Serves him right. Now we can have a good time with his bitch!'

Inside the shack, her face against the earth, Devi still hadn't moved from the spot where she had fallen. Darkness surrounded her, racking sobs rose from her throat. But before she had time to succumb, Tool Box unlocked the door and burst into the shack. She wanted to stand up, to look at him in the face, but he shone a torch into her eyes, and kicked her with all his might. She rolled to the other end of the room. He called a young boy to hold the light above her while he untied her hands.

She thought to herself that if he had wanted to coerce her, he could just as easily have left her hands tied. If he were going to kill her, why was he going to so much trouble?. In fact, Tool Box pushed her away and left. As he closed the door, he screamed to the crowd : 'Let's go!'

Yet again, a cheer went up, the crowd began to push and shove. Devi was convinced that the door was going to give. She hugged the wall, thinking that maybe she could slip out. However, the door withstood the mob. Tool Box managed to contain his men, and howled: 'Let's throw the dice!' This met with general approval. Then the screaming died down, until finally she could only hear a vague giggling. During this brief respite, she explored the shack, feeling its four walls. They were perfectly even, without the slightest crack. Inside the room, still

feeling her way around, she recognized the form of a bed, then a plastic bucket and a jug filled with water. She realized that the shack had been prepared for what was to follow.

Everything fell into place quite smoothly; with a certain logic even. Outside, the shouting resumed, and with that, a man entered the room. In the lamplight, Devi could see him on the threshold, moving in her direction. He was very big, but that was all she could make out; she didn't have time to see his face clearly. In fact, all she could remember about him was his smell, that of Thakur curry mingled with the stench of perspiration. He was sweating profusely. In the beginning she tried to resist, and managed to escape from his grasp. But despite the darkness of the room, it didn't take him long to overpower her, a fact which seemed to amuse him as he sniggered while searching her out. Then he took her on the ground. He was silent, heavy. Once more she fought back. So he withdrew and hit out at her, viciously biting her breast.

She began to scream uncontrollably, a scream wrenched from the very depths of her being, intense, its irregular dissonance rising and falling, endlessly. The man took to hitting her again. She could hardly breathe now. She fell back onto the ground, less crushed by the beating than by the acknowledgement of her pain. The man had done what he had wanted with her.

As he left the shack, he was applauded. This was followed by questions, oaths and the beginning of a quarrel. As before, Tool Box restored order. When the second man came in, Devi was still on the ground, her face turned to the wall. This time, she didn't try to scratch or bite. She just gave in. He was replaced by a third man, then a fourth who stretched her out on the bed. This particular one was enraged by her indifference to his beatings. He lost all control, and hammered her face with his fists. But still she continued to give in. He violated her as the next one did. When the sixth man also beat her she slipped into something close to oblivion.

Soon she couldn't tell whether it was day or night. Unlike the other shacks, the roof didn't have an air vent, so it was constantly dark. After a while she became accustomed to this,

finally making out a few chinks in the thatched roof, which let in slender rays of light. The day broke with the noise of the village, the sound of the conches, the women hailing each other before setting off for the well. Next came their songs as they ground the corn; the noise of the children playing in the square. All the ordered sounds and bustle of life. Was it also part of the order of things that she was locked in here?

When a man came in, she no longer moved or even objected; she wasn't even sure she suffered any more, her mind was a blank. In fact, there was only one thing she thought about: counting the men who came into the room. Any energy she had left was focused on these numbers. There were days when she vomited as soon as a man crossed the threshold of the shack. But each time it was in complete silence. She didn't want this to be known, any more than when she was beaten. On these occasions she buried her pain deep down inside her soul, rolled it into a tiny ball and transformed it into a murmur, a faded groan. But she never stopped counting.

As time went by, things became more difficult. Some of the men came several times, she recognized them by their smell, by the weight of their bodies on hers. They weren't all Thakurs; some of them smelt of Mallah food. There was even a barber, she was sure of that, because he stank of soap and hair-oil. Strangely enough, this discovery that nothing was easy, helped her. Devoid of all vitality, she drew strength from this, in order to yield and endure.

Then one evening, the Boss came in, followed by Tool Box. She was dozing on the bed, in a stupor that didn't grant her any rest, a torpor through which numbers, like the men who had come into her room, wandered through, along with the memory of Vikram. The Boss shone a light directly in her face as he had done the first evening. She tried to defend herself, sitting up straight. 'Kill me', she said. Tool Box answered mockingly, 'We are in no hurry, we have some news for you.' His hands were crossed behind his back, like a child about to give someone a surprise. She didn't react, but against all the odds, she actually felt hopeful once more. It was like a storm, a

tide in the recesses of her breast, so violent that it took her breath away. The Boss was aware of this, smiled and continued: 'Is it your dear Vikram that you are thinking of? You are curious, you want to know...' With this he grabbed her by the hair, forcing her on to her knees. The Tool Box now showed her what he had been hiding in his hands, a large dirty envelope. He opened it in front of her, while his brother pointed the torchbeam in her direction. It was the copy of a negative taken by the police; a photograph of Vikram's corpse. On the right of the photo there were two close-up shots of the head. A part of the jaw had been ripped away.

'You can keep it,' Tool Box said.

That evening he took Devi for the first time, in the torchlight, observed by his twin, as had always been the case.

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She continued to count. She confused the number of days, but never the number of men, not even those who came back. A foul stench pervaded the shack. She had become used to it, much as she had learnt how to make things out in the dark, and to recognize through the fustiness, the odour of each man.

Where were the gods? Where was time going? She no longer knew. She only knew that she had to live with this ignorance. She tried to remember that the strongest wasn't necessarily the most courageous, only the one who was least afraid. So she tracked down her fears, to conquer them. Sometimes, varying forms kept her alert, a vague sadness that became unbearable, in partial the floating haze of Vikram's memory. She could see his long, calm face, still touched by a certain beauty. She could see his mouth, his hands that always made their way to her, as though to a spring.

It was especially during these moments, that she invoked the words of the Guru. She repeated to herself that Vikram's body now resembled a wind that had died down, that his time had come and he had left. If she suffered now, it was only because

she had been taken by surprise, because she had never imagined that their life together would end, or even how it would end. For hours, maybe even days, Devi recited the Nagamantra. 'Death kills no one; it is men who kill themselves. Your battlefield is within, and you fight alone. Don't become weighed down with the blood of the dead. Let their souls peacefully cross the bounds of the world.' However, one thought arose within her for which the Guru had taught her no conjuration; for the other world that Vikram's love had opened up for her, a world way beyond this one.

When this happened she no longer knew how to survive the coming moments. Once more she smelt the stench of the room, and began again to fear the noise of the key in the lock. The weight of her wounded body was more than she could bear and she longed for death. At that moment everything converged, a solitary pit in which the torments of the body and soul unite.

One day a man came in, whose name, for once, she had managed to catch as another villager had called to him just as he was on the threshold. He was called Surendra Singh. It was the first time he had come in; she knew that as soon as he lay on top of her. He found pleasure, first and foremost, in insulting her. From time to time he forced her to open her mouth, spat into it, then forced her to swallow. When he had finished with her body, he lit a lamp, wanting to see her face. As she held his gaze, he hit her several times until she lowered her eyes. But one word escaped, a word that came from the depths of her being, or at least from what she had learnt in the forest during the mysterious hours spent with the Guru. He had taught her to express hatred with a slow and voiceless ferocity, like a snake about to attack. And Devi's voice hissed as she retorted:

'I will get my revenge, Surendra Singh.'

The man was rooted to the spot. Because of this sudden immobility Devi could feel his complete surprise, even in the darkness.

It only lasted a second. Surendra Singh lashed out and boxed

her face, before rushing outside, screaming to the villagers wandering around the square:

'She must be punished yet again! She must be punished, punished...'



Shakuntala had the best placed house in the village, above the square, and next to the well. When she was on the terrace, she could hide behind the low wall and see everything without being seen herself. If she didn't want to see, it was possible just to listen. Often, that was all she needed to do.

To live in a village requires a certain knowledge of what is going on and what is being said. If only to be able to speak judiciously, or, on the contrary, to remain silent. This takes on an added importance when the village is small and isolated, as Behmai was.

Shakuntala was like everyone else in Behmai. She hated the Mallahs. A few of them lived there, employed to hoe the land of the wealthier Thakurs. Shakuntala forbade her children to play with them. Neither did she go near their wives when she went to the well. When you have married well, as she had, given birth to sons, and live in the best placed house in the entire village, there is absolutely no reason to intermingle with those kind of people. You must respect only order, the unchanging order of things.

Nevertheless, Shakuntala asked herself if everything was really in order that day, at the end of August, around midday, when she saw from her terraces the Singh brothers open the door of the shack in which they had hidden the girl. She caught sight of them just as they grabbed her by the waist and threw her to the ground.

Until that moment, Shakuntala hadn't wanted to know about what went on over there. She behaved as all the other women in Behmai had since the girl had arrived; she simply avoided looking over to that side of the square. That whole affair was

the men's business, a subject not to be discussed. Her husband hadn't gone into the shack, she could swear to that, as would all the other women in the village. She had nevertheless observed that since the girl was locked inside, not one of the women ever mentioned her husband, her son, her father, or even her nephew or cousin any more. She couldn't help noticing that the women who lived below the square took a long detour in order to avoid passing in front of the shack. And no one answered the children when they asked why the men were always hanging around that part of the square for almost three weeks now. They wanted to know why they gathered together so regularly, why they shoved and pushed, why they came and went, going to great pains to double lock the door. They would have explained, if they had the words to do so. But they didn't. Now Behmai had something to hide. Shakuntala continued to tell herself that it was the men's business. The women's was to look after the hearth and go to the well, she declared to her sons. But at the same time, she was afraid.

The Singh brothers presence in the village changed everything. The people of Behmai were generally peaceful, but now even the wise became mad, the strong became weak. As for the weak, they become even more feeble, more spineless. Everyone dreaded the Boss and Tool Box, even their father, and the old men who had nothing left to hope for in this life. Sohan, the invalid was the only man who feared them a little less than the others.

Nevertheless, Sohan too had been dumbfounded by what he had seen in Behmai's square that day. He had been obliged to observe it, unlike Shakuntala. As soon as she had realized what was going on, she, who was normally so curious, such a chatterbox, didn't want to see or hear anything, probably for the first time in her life. Despite this, she couldn't help imagining things, and this fact alone made her lose sleep. In fact, it took her a week to get back to normal, and since then, she found it difficult to speak about it.

According to Sohan, it started at midday in the raw, white light often exuded at the end of the monsoon. For at least a week it hadn't rained at all. Surendra Singh had just come out

of the shack and called Tool Box, who in turn had run across the square. The Boss had joined them at once thereby creating what could almost be called a crowd, around the door. As usual, Tool Box begun to show off. He spoke very loudly as his brother looked on, amused.

Then Tool Box stopped gesticulating and unlocked the door. Sohan had looked at his watch, as he did each time a man went into the shack over these past twenty-two days that the girl had been locked up. Tool Box was the one who spent the longest time in there, usually a good half an hour. But he never went in alone; the Boss was always with him. From the very beginning, sharing girls was a favourite pastime of the twins. Rumour had it, that this was the reason matchmakers hadn't tried to find them partners.

That day, however, Tool Box had gone in alone. He had come out again almost immediately, pushing the girl in front of him. Her sari was in rags, and she had a swollen eye. The other one was half closed, in not much better a state. On finding herself in the bright sunshine, she raised an arm to protect herself from the glare.

At this stage, the men went running wildly all over the place, as did the children. The women timidly tried to call them back, but the children didn't heed them so they gave up. They promptly followed Shakuntala's example, and pulled a corner of their saris' over their faces. Those who were at the well, dropped their buckets and ran into the safety of their homes.

Tool Box and the Boss sat at the girl's feet, an untamed look on their faces scanning all around them, as she continued to protect her eyes from the glare. The other men followed suit. A long time passed during which the girl remained standing in the middle of this circle of men. She tried her best to stand up straight, but Sohan noticed that her legs were wobbling and the light still hurt her eyes.

Out of the blue, Tool Box's roving eye came to a standstill. Under the awning of the house nearest to him, he stared at two empty pots. Abruptly dispersing the crowd, he picked them up and placed them at Devi's feet. Then he said:

'Go and get me some water from the well.'

'I am not your servant, she answered brusquely,' and spat in his face.'

Tool box was quick to react. He knocked her down with his fist, then dragged her into the shack. All that could be heard was the girl screaming repeatedly, 'No, no,' but they couldn't hear what Tool Box was saying to her. Whatever it was, three minutes later the girl came out. She picked up the two pots and began the climb to the well.

'It's too easy that way,' Tool Box whined.

He threw himself on her and ripped off her clothes, leaving her neither the time nor the energy to defend herself. 'Don't be ashamed,' Tool Box added once she was naked. 'We will return your rags to you. After all, you only have to cross the square and climb down again.'

A little laughter began to well up, amidst the crowd but was smothered just as quickly. The girl lifted her head and put a pot under each arm. Because of her swollen eyes, it was difficult to see the expression on her face. She wasn't really present, Sohan decided, her lips barely moved, as though she were saying a prayer.

Something is about to happen, the invalid thought to himself. Something that has never happened before, that will leave its mark for all times. As it was, at this very moment the naked girl started to cross the square, her pots placed under her arms. Despite the fact her body was covered in bruises, she walked quickly. Tool Box caught up with her, and as he hit her twice the two pots rolled into the dust:

'Not like that,' he sniggered. 'One on top of the other, on your head. Like the other women do!'

The girl didn't move. So he added in a louder voice:

'Do you want to go back into the cabin with me?'

She didn't answer. He grabbed her by the nape of the neck and forced her to bend over the pots: 'Pick them up.'

She did as she was told, put the two pots on her head and continued her walk to the well. The troop of men and children followed closely behind. The brothers led the procession,

throwing insults at her. On the way, the children continued to laugh, the men far less; many of them were forcing themselves at this point. But the Boss had his eye on them, and constantly turned around, rousing them to jeer again.

For once Sohan was grateful that he could no longer walk. Hiding behind the small wall of her terrace, bundled up and veiled, Shakuntala saw her husband and sons in the crowd accompanying the girl. She closed her eyes instantly. At that moment, in her head, she was the one who was crossing the square, as she had done perhaps a million times, with two pots on her head—the lot of women since time began. Then suddenly, Shakuntala remembered that the girl was naked, and after that, she couldn't imagine anything more.

She collapsed onto the terrace and withdrew into the veil of her sari. Once she reached the well. The woman had to bend right over the rim and throw the bucket while leaning, until it hit the sheet of water. Then bend over once more to shake the rope, so that it would go down into the well. When the pulley creaked, it was time to pull the rope with all the strength she had. Once the bucket reached the edge, it had to be lifted to fill the pots. Lastly, she had to take a deep breath so that she could perch them on top of one another, lift her head and start walking. Apparently, how all this was executed, was one way of determining the most suitable prospective brides.

Suddenly, Shakuntala heard someone shout. It was the Boss. He was screaming: 'Be careful, don't spill any of it.' She crouched even further behind the low wall of her terrace. To get across the cursed square, avoiding puddles and the remaining mud, was certainly the most difficult part of the task.

Undoubtedly the pot was going to fall. From beneath his awning Sohan got the impression that the entire village was gripped by the same numbness as he was. Silence pervaded the market-place, and the raw, white light struck even the children. Behind the girl, no one dared move. Even the twins footsteps slowed down. The girl stumbled, a little water escaped from one of the pots. But she didn't spill anything, bravely continuing to move forward. She had now reached the door of the shack.

Gently putting her load down, she picked up her bodice and torn sari, and pushed open the door of her prison.

Tool Box however, didn't care that she had done as ordered. He rushed towards her, clamouring:

'You spilt some of the water! You can start all over again!'

He kicked the two pots violently, and pushed her back into the square. Devi saw the water spreading and fainted.

'Lock her up,' the Boss spat out.

His voice was suddenly taut. Tool Box looked at length at the girl who was stretched at his feet, seemingly perplexed, which was usually a bad sign. However, he appeared to share his brother's opinion:

'You are right,' he muttered. She must rest. She can begin again tonight.

That afternoon, no one saw the girl, apart from the twins. When evening came, and they wanted to begin the charade to the well again, not a soul was left in the square. So the brothers made a general announcement that they were going down to the river to spend the night praying in the Kali temple they had built, to beseech her protection for future raids. They left the key of the cabin to the first one who asked for it.

It was Surendra Singh. The following night, he was the only one to enter the shack. When he came out, he ordered cane alcohol to be brought to him, and with his back against the wall, started to drink. By dawn he was drunk. An old man approached him, asking him for the key. Surendra was so dazed that he handed it over without a fuss. Nevertheless, this man wasn't from Behmai, but from a large town on the northern route. He was a Brahmin who had come to buy corn from the only Thakur in Behmai whose loft hadn't been emptied during the previous drought. He was called Pandit, and was thin and slender, nondescript in fact, everything about him being dull and insipid.

Sohan watched his little game from beneath the awning. Pandit came out of the cabin, holding the girl by the hand, and dragged her towards the road heading north. Although quite old he was able to hold her each time she stumbled. Some

women were already in the square. Sohan was convinced that they had seen everything too, Shakuntala above all, who never missed a trick. But the women, without exception, did as he had done. No one said a word.



Pandit was a Brahmin, and was familiar with the stars and the cycles of the moon. But for Mahatma Gandhi, for whom India's independence was unthinkable without the abolition of the caste system, he would have kept his distance from those of lower rank, and would never had slipped up in his duties. So, seconds after he arrived in Behmai, when he saw the girl in front of the well, and heard from a villager the story of what had been going on during the past three weeks in the shack below the square, something stirred inside him. It was an obligation that surpassed all ordinary functions, and he knew immediately what he had to do.

He was old and had known what it was to suffer, having lost all his sons, then his wife, through illness or accidents. He was familiar with the burden of sleepless nights, of days that dragged out because of an aching soul. But when finally his suffering left him, as it did many men—a sort of favour one grants oneself—it led Pandit to consider the pain of others. He never actually said anything to those he felt to be in distress. He didn't like words. When he spoke, they refused to emerge, getting choked in his throat and smothered beneath his tongue and drowning between his glottis and his teeth. They only gave him any pleasure, in prayer, perhaps because they came from another life, and he only had to repeat them, not change them. So Pandit was happy to simply sooth those who were suffering with gestures, at the appropriate moment. As this renewed hope in others, he too was consoled in his own misery.

In Devi's case, it was the first time he had ever been involved with the fate of someone from a lower caste. It was probably why, despite his aversion to empty words, he agreed to tell his

own story. It gives a good idea of what was Devi's state when he helped her to escape. 'When I brought her out of there,' he said, 'she looked like a bag of bones and feathers. We had only been walking for an hour, when she collapsed right in the middle of the road, though I had been careful to leave Behmai by the northern route.'

Pandit had stopped the first bullock cart he had seen, and had asked the driver to take them to Simra, his village. The man had agreed. He scarcely noticed them, and duly dropped them off at the entrance to the village barely two hours later.

Pandit really believed Devi was going to die during the first few days she spent in his home. With reason, as the most ominous lunar month of the year had just begun, the month Yama the God of Death prefers to all others, so that he can tighten his grip over the feeble. He decided to consult his sacred books as though Devi were one of his own; to search for the most powerful incantations he could find, the kind which could cure the blind and heal the lepers. He finally found a prayer of mercy which he mumbled hundreds of times in the hope that the Goddess would deign to look generously upon the poor girl whose soul had been so cruelly tortured. For it was surely Devi's soul that had been wounded, Pandit reckoned, far more than her body. That was why she was unable to speak, or even swallow a mouthful. Above all, she couldn't be left in the dark. As soon as she found herself alone, she started screaming. He had ordered his two servants to take turns at her side—but only women. When she had set eyes on his own servant—an old man, as exhausted as he was, his life completely spent—Devi had begun to tremble uncontrollably.

In spite of all this, her first words were to Pandit when she got up at last, exactly five days later. He saw her running towards him one morning, looking as clean as if she had just come back from the river, wearing one of the cotton cloths that had been left beside her bed when she had arrived. Pandit remembers clearly Nagapanchami was being celebrated. Devi must have heard the sacred chants of the women, their comings and goings, the entire lighthearted, feverish commotion, which unfailingly

indicates that a feast is being prepared in the village. She had probably remembered a time when she had lived with her parents, and she too had prepared the offerings for the Anantanag. She too, joined the festival celebrations. While she didn't stir for the duration of the processions and the prayers, as soon as she saw Pandit returning from the temple, she ran straight to him—she must have been watching out for him. Watching him settle into his old chair as usual under the awning, she rushed over. Without even waiting to greet him, she declared: 'Now that I have been saved, I am going to prepare to take my revenge!'

Pandit had been taken off guard. With a foolish gesture he ripped off his glasses, as if it were through them he heard everything and they had just played a nasty trick on him. Stammering, he began to ask a question. But Devi immediately interrupted him: 'You saved me, I will be grateful to you forever.' She joined her hands and bowed before him. For a long time she remained prostrated with her face against the earth, motionless. However, when she stood up again, she continued in a deep, strong voice, as though she wanted to proclaim the news to the entire world: 'I am going to take my revenge now, I am going to take my revenge...'

She stood straight as an arrow, facing the village. Only her eyes betrayed her; they had a look that widened in answer to an untamed cry. It instilled fear in Pandit. He turned his head away, and began to rub his glasses on his cotton shirt, observing attentively once more the action in the village. Or rather, he pretended to, for without his glasses he couldn't see very much.

All the prayers that Pandit knew filed through his head, as he tried to find the mantra, without having to consult his books, which could bring her some peace of mind. But the harder he thought, the more he felt removed in being able to find it. He rubbed his glasses on his shirt with increasing vigour,-while she remained stiffly in front of his chair. Her head was held a little too high, her hands were clenched in the folds of her sari, as skinny as ever, a miserable bag of bones that stood erect, God only knows how, like a corpse with a will to live.

So it was that Pandit, the one who had an aversion to words, was suddenly inspired. He caught sight of the basket of fruit and sugar that he had just brought back from the temple, after having offered it to the Sheshnag as tradition required. He handed his fruit basket to Devi, blessing it with a phrase he had never actually read in any book before now:

'If you really want to take your revenge my girl, feed your strength!'

Devi remained immobile, content with just staring at him. In her dark look Pandit recognized no expectation, only an endless fear that is only known to those who have suffered the greatest hardships. 'Feed your strength', he heard himself repeating, fascinated by the authority he had discovered in his voice, but frightened too by his action and the trembling that had begun to course through his arm. Just as he had decided to retract, Devi drew closer to the basket and helped herself to a piece of fruit.

It was a mango. She tore it open with her teeth, then stuffed herself with it not bothering to wipe the yellow juice running down her chin. Instead, she leaned over and took a second, then a third one. Between each mouthful she gave short hiccoughs and chuckled. Pandit had absolutely no idea who or what she was making fun of. Maybe it was of him, the old Brahmin, helpless all of a sudden, sagging, bewildered, and dumbfounded before her. Or maybe it was of herself and her unexpected craving.

Just as suddenly, she stopped. She gave a long sigh, wiped her mouth, placed her hand on her stomach and raised her eyes tenderly to Pandit. He thought that she was going to bow once more at his feet, and wondered what he was going to do, as he was sure that this time the words wouldn't come.

Instead, she started to laugh. It was a deep, husky laugh that lasted long between violent hiccoughs that resembled sobs. It was already a kind of revenge, like a banquet or a feast, a bellyfull of laughter that was terrifying the way it shook her body so much. Once again, Pandit was flabbergasted. Devi was in the process of teaching him something completely new. He couldn't

remember the last time he had laughed. Better still, he gave in; he brightened up and smiled, feeling in turn his sides heaving. Overwhelmed by laughter, he threw back his head, guffawed, he was unable to say exactly what had come over him. But maybe it was for the same reasons as her, too much buried pain, too many unexpressed hopes, too much unhappiness, and too many anguished days and nights. In short, a plethora of desire, of a thirst to be reborn. Too much life, still.

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It took Devi about three weeks to get back on her feet She had completely recovered by the time the Moon of the Dead was over. Normally, it was the most difficult time of the year for Pandit, as he invariably returned from his world to the earthly one to dwell on old memories. He recalled a time when his house was a real home, enlivened by the gracious movement of his wife, filled with his sons and his servants. However that year, these shadows faded into the background. Pandit carried out his rites as usual with the utmost care and reverence, but his conscience wasn't allayed. Something had crept in, something which made his sadness dissolve. Finally, he admitted to himself, that despite the distance that existed between them, his every thought was now for Devi.

The servants were astonished. The normally silent Pandit turned into a chatterbox when he saw her walking once again : 'She ate well today. Have you noticed how she has put on some weight, how she is getting bigger? Look how she is filling out, she is beginning to go out again, to walk down by the fields of sugar cane. She can stand up straight now. Look how she is fattening out, her cheeks rounding...'

Although the inflexible demands of his rituals and prayers took up most of his time, Pandit constantly kept an eye on her. When he didn't see her returning from her walks, his anguish was visible. When a maid told him she had woken up with a start during the night, her head aching from a nightmare she

couldn't speak about, he was alarmed further still. It was the same when they told him she hadn't wanted to eat anything that morning. If the night had been peaceful, or her hand had reached out for her plate, a fleeting light appeared in Pandit's lacklustre eyes. But his joy was short-lived, for he could also see the day drawing near when Devi would leave. He even knew where she would go—to the ravines. It was fate. Nonetheless, he wanted to see her survive. So he continued to fatten her up.

With this in mind, he ordered his servants to add more butter to the pot of lentils, more oil to the curry vegetables, more syrup and cashew nuts to the kheer. He watched her bloat in the same way that some peasants raise baby tigers or young cobras. It was always with a kind of terrified wonderment. For the moment Devi was calm, she no longer spoke of revenge. She remained in the background and hardly spoke to him, happy to sleep, eat, wander around the fringe of the gorges. And Pandit hung on to only one desire—that she wouldn't leave without warning him.

But he didn't know what she was like; he had neither the time not the opportunity. Although, he suspected that her energy was like a bottomless well, he still didn't know its source and how it survived. Now that she was back on her feet again, Devi wanted to measure the total extent of her shame. She wanted to have her fill of bitterness, to stuff herself with hostility and resentment. Then she would ruminate over them, macerate them in order to sharpen within her the forces of revenge. If only for this reason, she still needed him.

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Pandit heard all about it one evening on returning from the temple. There was a small pile of sand that had been brought up from the river by one of his nephews, who wanted to build an oratory to the Goddess. He had never had enough money to buy the cement, so the sand had stayed there, wide open to the rains which had speckled it, hollowed out little corries and

miniature valleys. It was a blessing in disguise for the children who often came to play there.

That evening Pandit thought once more that his glasses were playing tricks with his eyesight, when he saw Devi crouched in the middle of this sand, carefully levelling it as a child would before scratching out large geometrical shapes with a stick. She was frowning in concentration. However, she was not at all surprised to see Pandit cast his shadow over her drawing; in fact she hardly turned around. He stopped to watch her for a moment, silent as usual.

To begin with, he thought that she had begun drawing a large sacred motif, the kind of magical design that the women of the Valley believed would bring the blessings of the heavens on their homes. But as the drawing progressed, the symbols that she traced out appeared to be unfamiliar. He didn't recognize any of the rosettes or festoons that normally extracted favours from the gods. Contrary to what he expected, Devi, who found him speechless, spoke first. The words she uttered were even stranger than the couple of lines she had just sketched: ' Look at me properly, Pandit. Everything is going to come back to me. I won't forget anything. I want to remember everything.'

Pandit took off his glasses, and screwing up his eyes, bent over the drawing. The meaning completely escaped him, the words suffocating beneath his tongue. So Devi stood up, threw the piece of wood behind her, and once again repeated the same words.

Pandit realised that she was talking about Behmai, and with this, the lines that she had traced in the sand became horribly clear. The long rectangle in the centre was the village square. In the top corner, the big circle represented the well, and the small square at the bottom, the shack. The two lines facing one another in opposite directions corresponded to the roads leading north and south. Finally, the long, winding furrow that she had been digging out of the sand when he had taken her by surprise, was quite simply the river.

'Tell me what you know,' Devi continued.

He turned away and put his glasses back on. He wanted to

go home. But she was one step ahead of him, and blocked his way. He thought it wiser to exercise some patience. But with a girl like her, was it possible to play this game of patience until the very end? He didn't dare look her in the eye. As she didn't move, he mumbled the first words that came into his head:

'What I know is common knowledge.'

'Of course it is common knowledge... I believe you as far as that's concerned!'

She almost shouted this. Pandit couldn't say whether it was a kind of moaning or sniggering. Pain and shame had once again washed over her; her voice suddenly wavered; he thought she was going to start sobbing. But it didn't last. Devi pulled herself together, and found the strength to carry on:

'What do they say about me?'

'They feel sorry for you.'

This was the second time that Pandit has spoken off the top of his head. The words had flown out of his mouth like small, dry sparks, almost brittle. As for Devi, she was left open mouthed. Then something strange happened.

She then produced a large, shiny photograph, and unfolded it.

He recognized him immediately, having seen him two months before on the front page of a newspaper which had declared the victory of the police over the dacoit Vikram Mallah. In fact, it was in the accompanying article that he had read the name of the adventuress that the gang leader had taken for his mistress. The newspaper had confirmed that following the death of her lover, who had been gunned down by the police during a dangerous pitched battle, she had drowned herself in the river.

Pandit cannot remember what his thoughts had been on reading this article. But from the moment he had knowingly taken Devi in, aware of exactly who she was and where she had come from; he had always refused to make a link between the passionaria of the newspapers and the kid that had been flayed alive.

But this photograph changed the face of things. Perhaps, it

was the size of the negative, far bigger than it had been in the newspapers. Or maybe its transparency and reflections, the long, white, matt streaks between the folds, almost like new wounds on Vikram Mallah's corpse. In any case, everything abruptly became intense and burning, acquired a veneer of truth. For just one second on the doorstep from where he was staring at this photograph of the dead man, Pandit suddenly felt tired of his acceptance of his destiny. Tired of the boring routine of his life, of being buffeted between memory and suffering. Tired, even, of being compassionate to others. Right now he felt like switching over to adventure. Out of the blue he needed something more powerful. He needed to help this girl take revenge, to assume a part of her hatred, and it was a feeling that completely overpowered him.

So he came back, dreamlike, and sat on his old chair. Then he whispered to Devi, with a vague expression on his face, distracted by the sun that was fading behind the enormous fields:

',Tell me.'

# PART IV

She related her story, and he listened to it with relish, almost greedily, in a way he had never listened to anyone else before. He lived only to hear the rest of her tale, with only mealtimes and the night keeping then apart. The long wait, as also the thought, that she might, on a whim or out of exhaustion, refuse to tell him the next part, sometimes pained him.

But Devi's hatred was so potent that she needed to express it. She told him everything, about Mayadin, Kailash, Babu, Mansukh the policeman, Lukka, the Singh brothers and of course, Vikram; especially about Vikram. In fact, from time to time Pandit had the vague impression that she was telling the story to her lover and not to him. She would suddenly begin to stare up into the sky and exclaim: 'Look, look what they did to me; that's all they left me,' pointing to the man's watch on her wrist that Vikram had given her after the attacks on the highway. It's face was broken; it's hands had stopped at half past one, the time of the kidnapping and the murder on the sands at Unnao. 'But how can I take revenge?' she added. 'Where are the rest of the gang? Where is Mustaqeen? I don't even know where Mustaqeen is...' This name often came up in her stories, and although she seemed to detest it, she also said that he was the only one who could help her in seeking revenge: 'If only I knew where he had disappeared...' Then she would remain silent for a long time. And just as Pandit was about to give up, she suddenly shouted 'You too, Pandit, you too must tell me everything. Tell me about the people of Behmai. I want to know everything. I want to remember everything!'

Pandit shook his head, wrung his hands, took off his glasses, and repeated that he didn't know about the people of Behmai. For him they were only Thakurs from whom he bought corn.

As if discouraged by his expression she dropped her questions and came back to her story.

All her power now found verbal expression. Day after day, as she spoke, her eyes and her hair became glossy once more; she filled out, her cheeks and her breasts regained their prominence. All the same, her nights were still turbulent. Her nightmares continued. She woke up screaming, breathlessly uttering between two sobs: 'I have no home, I have no home.' Pandit was terrified when she screamed: 'I am the girl who brings misfortune to everyone', for this filled his servants with dread. She usually went back to sleep straightaway. As for Pandit, he stood, watching over her until dawn, gripped by another horror altogether. He was afraid that she would flee; that his women would chase her away. Or else, that she would lose her appetite, her memory—worse still, her desire to speak.

Nevertheless, Pandit had a sharp eye; he sensed something of a threat in what Devi was telling him. Her words and accounts were becoming ever more difficult to follow. For a while, she needed to speak to him, in order to be able to express herself once more: 'I want to know everything, Pandit. I want to remember everything.' She wouldn't admit that she had been beaten without ever having had the chance to fight, couldn't bear the thought of not knowing what happened on the river, between Unnao and Thakur country when she had been drugged with chloroform. Harder than anything else was not knowing what had happened afterwards. She calls the strange interlude in the shack, and those confused weeks, the lost days. That is, when she actually manages to talk about them.

A day dawned unlike any other. It wasn't an ordinary day to begin with, as they were preparing for another celebration, Dussehra. In every courtyard men were polishing their guns before presenting them at the temple, as they did every year, so that they could ask Durga to grant them some of her savage strength. Everything that could draw blood, human or animal, was being polished: old swords, penknives, cutlasses, daggers, machetes, and rifles. The spectacle of recently scrubbed guns, their blades sparkling in the hot sunshine, was enough to

convince people that her limitless powers were present.

Devi had just arrived under the awning. Today, as usual she waited for the sentence that Pandit uttered each day without fail, by now a sort of established ritual : 'So Devi, did you sleep well?'

But that morning he didn't dare ask her. The very moment Devi came outside, her eye caught a man sitting in the nearby courtyard, amidst a pile of rags. He rubbed the blade of a dagger with a handful of sand. As soon as she saw him, her eyes clouded over. She said to Pandit:

'I once had a gun too!'

Feverishly she started to drum the place where she normally hid Vikram's photograph, through the thickness of her sari.

'Leave that photograph alone, Devi,' Pandit retorted. 'Your strength doesn't come from paper.'

She shook her head, and persisted in tapping it underneath her sari. By now she was scrutinizing the cane fields, as tense as a panther about to spring.

'Stop brooding,' Pandit repeated. 'You are in good health...'

'In good health! With my dishonour! And empty-handed with it!'

She was laughing nervously, and hiccupped intermittently. He tried to help her, gently uttering her name over and over again, 'Devi, Devi'.

'Shut up!' she cut him short. 'My enemies are running free and you expect me to walk with my head held high!'

But that morning Pandit centred on her, with powerful, fitting words that came to him, as though destiny itself had taken command of his tongue. The truth is, Devi had been waiting to hear them all along, and she gave him a radiant smile as soon as she heard them:

'Dishonour is only for those who wanted to cover you with shame. Not for you.'

'Prove it to me.'

'You will see.'

He too turned to face the fields, staring at length at the sky above the cane, which was making the early light shimmer. When he finally brought his gaze back to her, Devi hadn't moved. Her

eyes were still hard and unmoving, unnaturally dilated as she waited in anticipation of his answer.

'Just give me two weeks,' he added.

And with this, he went home. The following morning Pandit bade her goodbye and left, carrying his large black umbrella with the ivory handle, the most precious thing he possessed. His father had served the Raja of Godh as astrologer and chiromancer, and the Raja had presented this umbrella to him. Now, Pandit always carried it with him when he went into the countryside, in order to protect his bald pate from the sunshine.

Devi showed absolutely no surprise. He made her swear that she wouldn't go anywhere before his return and she agreed. 'I am leaving on a pilgrimage,' he announced to his servants. 'Look after Devi!' They didn't have the time to inquire any further, as he had already turned on his heel and gone.

Being old, he walked stiffly. He took the path leading west to the main road, where the buses plied. It lay in exactly the opposite direction to the pilgrimage route and the way to the great temple. The entire village, in fact, was convinced that Pandit had really left for the town. Whether it was Gwalior or Kanpur, they couldn't decide. Neither could anyone guess the reason for his visit. They were inclined to believe that it was an old man's fancy. All the same, Pandit was severely criticized. It wasn't fitting to leave like that, without warning, even if it was to discover what the face of eternity looked like.

However, Devi had her own idea about this. She kept her thoughts to herself, divulging nothing at all, and especially not to the servants who now scorned her. In any case she was equally disdainful. She spent her days in the cane fields, keeping an eye on the road leading west. That was why she was the first to see. Pandit return, on the evening of the tenth day, exhausted but radiant, carrying an oblong balluchon. She guessed at once what was hidden underneath it.

It was as if she had guided him by remote control along the roads and side-streets. Pandit had actually ventured into the depths of the market of Gwalior where he had finally tracked down Vikram's arms-dealer. From him he had bought, at great

expense, an old Mauser 303. Then in a old store close by, he had found some second-hand Blue Star sports shoes, more or less of Devi's size. And finally, a pair of jeans, in which he had wrapped the rifle and the shoes. The ensemble was then tied up with a long red scarf.

Devi wept so much that Pandit himself had to unwrap the Mauser for her. It appeared to be in perfect working order, almost identical in every way to the one that had been stolen from her. However, there was one problem. Because he hadn't had enough money left there were no cartridges to go with the gun. A little later, as Devi eavesdropped on the chattering servants, she learnt that he had spent his very last rupee, and did not have enough left even, to buy grain if the next monsoon was delayed. Other than his field and his clay house, the only thing he now owned was his big umbrella.



Just three days later she left, and Pandit didn't try to stop her. He had been prepared for it anyway. He had guessed from her sudden silences and her deceiving looks. From the moment she saw the Mauser, she hadn't stopped fiddling with her amulet.

Pandit had noticed this stone around her neck in the first few days when he had been seeking out the prayers to say in order to cure her. He had even wondered at the time whether it was the stone that was making her ill. But he had never dared ask her. Even some time later when Devi spoke about Vikram's watch, she hadn't uttered a word about the talisman. She hadn't explained where it came from, nor why the Singh brothers had given it to her. It was this last point that set him thinking, more than the stone itself. Pandit knew where they could be found, those black, veined pieces of gravel with blue and pink crystal streaks. In the depths of the forest, nowhere else. The tribesmen were the only ones capable of digging them out, keepers of secrets even darker than themselves. No one had ever been able to overcome their powers.

Like everyone who lived in the ravines and plains, Pandit feared those who lived in the remote forests, far away from the villages. But at the same time he also had great respect for them. No man had ever conquered these sorcerers, not even the great pale-faced magus', descendants of a complex hierarchy of priests devoted to purity and scriptures, who reigned many centuries ago. They had been forced to a halt at the edge of the forest—the Other World, as they called it. They had yielded to these magicians who paid no heed to the secrets of time, who were capable of the most awe-inspiring exploits. They could extract tears from stones, favours from the stars, force rivers to flow upstream, the sun to move in a different direction, the moon to reproduce itself.

It was there too, in the somber light of their brambly thickets that Durga was born; the Eternal Inaccessible, as black, as bloody as they themselves were, who roamed far and wide. When one of the plainsmen needed, quite simply, to derive strength from a powerful force in order to overcome the worst of his trials, he went to her, the devi. They went to her strange sorcerers who sometimes lived in the trees. To her saints and her sages men. And to her Guru of the Stone.

So seeing Devi wandering around the courtyard, fingering her talisman, Pandit could guess everything. After three days he chose to relieve her of all the lies she was contemplating in order to leave him without feeling guilty. One evening he came across her, and without any preamble said:

'Go, Devi. It's enough, just go! Go over, yonder. I will keep your gun for you.'

He had spoken like the people of the plains, saying over there to indicate the forest. From this simple word that hadn't been explicitly pronounced, Devi knew that she had been found out. Without a word, she escaped into the little room that he had given her, at the other end of the courtyard. She came out at dawn, only to bid him goodbye.

She took neither her gun nor her jeans. Not even her shoes. Dressed in a sari, barefooted and empty-handed, she was like a

pilgrim. Pandit was coming back from the stream where he washed himself each morning, when he saw her coming out. He didn't say a word. He was prepared for anything, even the fact that she might leave without saying goodbye. Just then she turned back. As if in a trance, she moved stiffly, then collapsed at his feet to greet him. It was a cool dawn, the first of the season. When she stood up again she was trembling. Pandit noticed this at once. However, she put on a swaggering air and looked up at the clear, blue sky filled with large flocks of herons, as was usual in autumn. Not wanting to leave wordlessly, she muttered:

'The days are passing...'

'And your time has come,' Pandit added. On this note, he went home if only to avoid seeing her leave.



From that day on, Pandit couldn't keep still. He was constantly on the move. There were days when nobody even knew where he was. 'As usual, probably wandering through the fields,' grumbled his servants. 'If only we knew what he was up to. He has gone nuts since that girl left!'

It was true, Pandit was no longer himself since Devi had left for the jungles. People only knew that to be in such a state he had to be looking for something or maybe someone. Nervous and feverish, sometimes he walked so quickly that he became breathless while at other times, he seemed to move like a robot, his back stiffened, his eyes fixed like a sleepwalker's. Never once did he look at those who crossed his path.

In the village of Simra, all agreed with the servants' opinion, that it was the girl's departure that had affected his mind. And yet no one blamed Devi, not even the few Thakurs who lived close to the fountain. She remained in the villagers' minds the poor ragamuffin they had seen arriving one morning in the arms of the old, mad Pandit, as skinny as a desert goat. After a couple of days; they had realised that she was the poor girl who

had fallen into the clutches of the people of Behmai. The Brahmin didn't have to confirm anything. Everyone felt sorry for her.

They all agreed. Pandit had done the right thing to bring her home, even if it had threatened the safety of the village. No words could express what she had been subjected to. It was worse than shame or dishonour, and more like the torture at the hands of Yama, the God of Death. What were the people of Behmai thinking of, everyone wondered. They were known to be of tough stock, thoroughly heartless and soulless. But to go as far as committing unspeakable atrocities; clothes being ripped off in the square, the pots of water, and all the other horrors...

Certainly the gods wouldn't let things be so. If they didn't avenge this poor little waif who had recently fled into the forest, bare-footed and empty-handed, just as madmen and saints did, who would? No one knew anything about her family, her lover, or her husband. No one really knew which one of them had been gunned down by the Singh brothers. No one knew who had cornered him by shooting him in the back, so that they could serve up his corpse to the cops, together with his machine-gun and cartridge pouch, in the bargain. 'They are dogs, jackals that taint everything they touch. They drive the people of their village crazy,' the inhabitants of Simra grumbled. 'And only a poor old man from our own village to save the girl from all that! And then only by accident, because the people of Behmai had taken all they had to take from her. And now that the girl has been cured of her madness, the poor old man, that holyman, has now gone nuts as well...'

The rumour quickly circulated, in Simra as it did elsewhere. But it was always whispered. Statements interspersed with silences that told far more than the brutal truth ever could have. People only knew that the girl was the companion of the former well-known bandit, Vikram Mallah. The victorious announcement, by the police and the photograph of his mutilated body which the police had left to rot on the edge of the ravines, well-guarded, despite the disgusting smell was proof

of this. Nothing was left but the bones. Undoubtedly, Vikram Mallah was now a ghost, and had returned with the intention of tormenting his murderers. Some of the peasants however swore that the police had handed the bones over to the Singh brothers, in exchange for his machine-gun. It was said, the twins had amused themselves by grinding them in a corn-mill and had then thrown the powder into a demijohn of alcohol and distributed it during an orgy one night.

Which of the two versions was credible remained uncertain. In fact, only on one point were all agreed. None of this would ever have happened if it hadn't been for the Singh brothers. Thakurs or not, this time the twins had gone too far. But who could avenge the unfortunate Vikram Mallah, apart from other bandits? Overcome with grief, his family hadn't come forward, his gang had disappeared into the gorges, and the police were patrolling the entire area. For the time being, they could only think of one man capable of obtaining justice on his behalf. His most loyal friend, the most sterling of bandits, Mustaqeen the Great, whose name could scarcely be heard as it was invariably uttered in a whisper and even those who dared to, were overwhelmed by the respect it engendered. A millionaire, by virtue only of his gun, never from rape, or murder of an enemy, the reward for his capture was set at seventy thousand rupees, the biggest sum the Valley had ever known. But Mustaqeen remained elusive. Since the beginning of the monsoon, he had completely disappeared. He wasn't far away; that much was certain. He would probably attack again any day now. But the policemen had given up trying to buy information from the peasants who were supplying him. They would have needed a small fortune to get them to speak.

While the people of Simra and elsewhere decided to pray and wait, only one man thought differently. Pandit, the small, balding priest, forgetful now of his old books and his prayers, was tramping field and road, protected by his black umbrella, to find the key to the mystery of where, in fact, Mustaqeen was hiding.

He didn't shrink from difficulties. He took everything in his stride. Although he had never listened to the radio, he borrowed money from a usurer in Kalpi, and bought himself a transistor which he took on his travels so that he could follow the news bulletins, exactly as the bandits did. Nowadays, he was also the first one to read the newspaper, the Kanpur Express, which the sarpanch bought with common funds. Feverishly, he would glance through it, tracking down the smallest paragraph that spoke about the gang's activities. Depending on what he had read, he would select the route to be taken.

The monsoon over, despite the presence of the police the kidnappings and raids had resumed. As soon as he heard a village had been plundered, he hastened to get there. Feigning pity, muttering prayers and blessings, all the while he sounded out the peasants. Although they had no proof, the villagers always knew who were the enemies in their midst, that had supplied the bandits with food and arms. Pandit waited patiently for them to finish their litany of curses and suspicions. Then he proceeded to where the traitors could be found. Once there, he always used the same ruse, and each time it worked perfectly . He sat down in the village centre near the well or the pond, hunched under his umbrella, looking exhausted and depressed, an attitude that came quite naturally. The women and children invariably ran across to him. He grasped the first hand that came and from it started to relate the person's past, as he had learnt from his father. He began with what he believed to be true. Then he revealed the truth that he had discovered about their rival village. He spoke about the grain they had recently sold to people passing through, of goats whose throats had been slit, to feed big men, strong men , bandits maybe. Yes, that was it, bandits led by a great leader. They weren't far away, calmly hidden, protected by the devi in that temple, that hamlet whose name was on the tip of his tongue—why couldn't he remember, it must be old age, undoubtedly. His memory was no longer what it used to be, nor his eyes; above all his eyes...

Pandit never even had time to rub his eyes, before someone came up with the name that he was waiting for. Then he would predict the future a little; then read another palm. It didn't take him long to figure out the villagers who had an uneasy conscience. These were the ones he preferred, because they generally had the most to say. He read all kinds of palms those of the Mallahs as well as those of the Thakurs, never asking for money. Surely he remained unsullied, because he was carrying out a duty that was more important than anything else, a duty that permitted him to face every kind of impurity.

This was how, at the end of a month and a half of toing and froing between the villages in the Valley, Pandit succeeded in achieving something that the police of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan put together had failed to do. He discovered the hiding-place of Mustaqeen. Pandit even managed to get an invitation from him, to meet him in the grottoes of Baha. Mustaqeen had heard of an old soothsayer who was roaming the gorges, and who could interpret like no one else, what was written in the stars.

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Pandit approached Mustaqeen as he had all the others. He probed his tendons and muscles, in order to determine his resistance. There was something impenetrable in that hand, something that was denied, was hidden, a little like a dam. Pandit had never held a hand that was so difficult to decipher, or indeed so biased against women and pleasure. The base of his thumb was flat with a scaly skin. His index finger had the same smooth appearance. There was no doubt about it. This man's senses had withered, his heart was pinched; it shunned joy and the whims of the soul. Perhaps because of a woman, he surmised, a long, long time ago. But how could he say this to him without making him angry? And, more importantly, how could he get around to speaking about Devi?

The kerosene lamps that lit the grotto were slowly running

out. Pandit took the liberty of picking up one of these lamps. Just then, he saw something that had escaped his notice; the tips of Mustaqeen's fingers. He had calluses, which were, without a shadow of a doubt, those of a musician. Just behind Mustaqeen he made out a harmonium.

Pandit decided to improvise, as he did each time the future was hazy. He allowed himself to be carried away by the melody of words, stringing them together like the pearls on a necklace. Eventually the hand relaxed, and the truth was revealed, bit by bit. Pandit droned on. 'You have never fled from danger. You have turned your back on something, Mustaqeen the Great, that I don't see, but I know that music has been your saviour. It remains your secret, your source of tenderness and solace. It's your strength when you take revenge, for you are a man who doesn't kill for pleasure but out of respect for order. You reject the presence of any dissonant elements in either your song or your life. That is why you love justice.' As he enveloped him in words, Mustaqeen's hand became limp in his. When Pandit finally sensed that he had softened, like the butter that must be melted before offering it to the gods, he came out with the sentence that he had been brooding over since he entered the den:

'You are going to fight for a woman, Mustaqeen the Great.'

Mustaqeen drew back his hand immediately.

'There is no woman in my life,' he lashed out.

'I know,' Pandit insisted. 'I also know that your soul is above all ordinary passions. Nevertheless, you are going to fight for the honour of a woman.'

'A woman's honour is in the house, not in the ravines.'

'Her honour is also yours...'

'What are you talking about! I have neither wife, sister, nor daughter!'

Mustaqeen burst out laughing, but something in his laughter rang hollow. Then he stole a glance at Pandit, a crafty look in his eye. Strangely enough, that was the first time Pandit observed his nose. It too reflected a kind of wiliness:

'I know what you Brahmins are like,' he snarled. 'Charlatans, all of you...'

Pandit didn't flinch. He simply stared at the furthest end of the grotto, continuing in his most humble voice:

'You have already thought out your revenge. You have gathered your men together to discuss it, and you have spoken about this woman.

'About her man, yes! But not about the woman! What was that girl to us!'

Pandit repressed a smile. He might be Mustaqeen the Great, but he had allowed himself to be taken in by the trick of fortune-telling, just like everyone else. Pandit continued:

'...A girl who carried a gun. A girl who suffered the greatest injustices; whose man was killed like a dog, while you were here, hidden in your cave...'

This was too much for Mustaqeen.

'That's enough' he snapped, his voice cracking.

Pandit didn't insist. He made his way out of the grotto, his step that of an old, exhausted man. Once outside, his eyes clouded over. He tottered and couldn't open his umbrella. Mustaqeen rushed over to help him.

'Who told you all that?' he asked breathlessly, taking him under his arm.

'I read it in your palm.'

His eyes were stinging him more and more. Mustaqeen unfolded the umbrella. Pandit had regained his balance, and tried to pull it towards him, to protect his eyes from the light, but Mustaqeen held it by the handle and again whispered:

'The girl... Is she alive?'

'I just told you. You are going to defend her.'

'So, what's her name?'

'You know as well as I do!'

'Her name!'

Mustaqeen hung onto the umbrella and pulled it so hard that Pandit thought it was going to break. He yielded to him, saying:

'Devi.'

'All women are called Devi!'

Mustaqeen made a face, but gave him back his umbrella all the same. The sun was beating down, its rays piercing the worn

cloth. Through it, Mustaqeen's moustache seemed to be even more pronounced, his nose even longer. The harsh light made Pandit's eyes water once more and forced him to take off his glasses. While he was wiping them, he took the opportunity to feebly communicate the truth he wished to:

'You are right, Mustaqeen. There are many women in the Valley called Devi. But there is only one who has followed, as an equal, in the footsteps of a famous bandit.

'Do you know, or are you guessing?' Mustaqeen hissed.

'More tears streamed from Pandit's eyes. This time he didn't even bother to wipe them away, but merely sighed:

'As good as.'

'What about the man?' Mustaqeen went on. 'Talk to me about the man.'

'Give me your palm again.'

Mustaqeen stretched it out obligingly. Pandit folded his umbrella. The gangster's hand was steady, but minor shudders ran down the length of his nose.

'The man is looking for revenge. Revenge for both him and his wife. His wife had been part of the band till exactly one year; the day he died. She has suffered the greatest hardships.'

'She is the bearer of misfortune,' Mustaqeen grumbled.

'You are on the side of justice, Mustaqeen the Great. You will not thwart your destiny. This girl will come to see you in the near future, and you will defend her.'

'No one knows where I am hiding.'

'She will find out. It won't take her long.'

'I was Vikram Mallah's friend, not hers.'

'You cannot take revenge for one without defending the other, Mustaqeen the Great.'

Mustaqeen was now completely still, his palm once again lay light in the Pandit's. His eyes began to follow the lines drawn in the hollow of his hand and finally he murmured the question that had been tormenting him since he had heard about Pandit's special powers:

'Tell me if the girl will bring me bad luck. Tell me how I will die.'

Pandit decided to do something that he had never done before. He lied. He lied calmly, taking his time, in a hoarse and low voice that soothed. He reckoned that he had done the right thing. This hand had been the most stubborn he had ever known. His head had felt heavy while he tried to decipher it. And because his eyes had been streaming throughout, he wasn't entirely sure that the sign he glimpsed between the forefinger and the middle finger was really the trident, the symbol with which the gods stamp those who are doomed to a terrible death.

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Once again, he waited for Devi, but was more self-possessed. The Mauser was still there in the back room where he had given her shelter, under her things and a pile of earthenware pots. Pandit almost believed they had magnetic powers. 'Time will tell,' he told himself. 'It will perform what is predestined. Inevitably, she will come back to me.'

As it happened, he was right. One morning after he had washed himself and prayed on the river's bank, he saw a small boat coming in his direction rowed by a young boy. The light was already too bright, and his eyes watered more frequently now. So, it wasn't until the boat had drawn alongside that he finally recognized Devi as the agile girl who jumped from the boat; from her cat-like movements. She was sharper and more caustic. It was enough, for Pandit to realize that she had recovered her old form.

They exchanged a few words in greeting. But he didn't wanted to detain her. 'Your things are still over there' he murmured, pointing to the road. Then he added, trying to straighten his back, 'I know where Mustaqeen is hiding.'

This time instead of grimacing she actually smiled. Nevertheless, she still didn't ask Pandit what he had expected her to, till they reached in front of his house. 'So, where is Mustaqeen?' 'He's at the bottom of the great Baha ravine; in a grotto, behind the Ganesh temple. You must go upstream.' For

the second time, Devi shook her head. There was a moment of complete calm, then she continued: 'Are you going to come with me?' He took off his glasses: 'No. You are the one they are waiting for.' 'They are waiting for me?' Pandit gave a little laugh, which annoyed her. She retorted: 'First of all, how do you know?'—'I just know.' Pandit nodded towards a devi shrine, nearby. 'I too have the right to ask favours...'

Devi looked perplexed, but went to fetch her Mauser. She cheered up as soon as she found it. Half an hour later, she was on her way to the river accompanied by Pandit. He even bargained over her passage fare with the ferryman, and paid for it with the money the usurer had lent him. She was still wearing a sari. The Mauser was in a plastic bag, wrapped up in the jeans with the red head-band and the sports shoes, exactly in the same way as Pandit had given them to her. As she was leaving, he felt obliged to whisper: 'Be careful, the police are everywhere; don't change until the last minute.' On this occasion, she was the one who burst out laughing; a joyful, insolent chuckle, as if to tell him, that if he had his little agreement with the gods, she too had hers, far greater ones. With this, she jumped into the boat.

Pandit can only remember the lapping of the water. Seconds later, he could only imagine rather than actually see the small boat. A large cloud loomed before his eyes, a prelude to the shadows in which he lived after this event. A darkness, from which the most radiant words that were ever attributed to Devi, flowed forth. Ardent expressions, aroused by this unknown world that she opened up for him; this darkness in which he could see.



Thanks to the young Attu or rather his diary we know what took place during the meeting between Devi and Mustaqeen.

Attu had green eyes, and a very pale skin. He believed that his grandfather was an English officer. Did he get this idea from a movie? Usually, as soon as he was out of the ravines he rushed

to the cinema. Or maybe it was from one of the many comics he always carried around with him in his back-pack. Whatever the case may be, he was among those who had studied a bit, and wrote impeccable English. Much of the diary was in this language. Because of this, at least within the gang he could guarantee that his notes remained a secret. The men in the band weren't all illiterate. However, what Attu had noted in Hindi was common knowledge: the purchase of ammunition, food, medicine, the suppliers' nicknames, sometimes the names of their ancestors, their addresses, and the identity of the informers who were link men. But each time Attu wanted to add on a short commentary, he would write it in English, regardless of the content. From the diary's style, and the melodramatic, naive, narration of the events, it was easy to recognize the influence of small time script-writers who had fed his imagination since he was very young. At the same time, his attention to detail was obsessive. In fact, Attu's diary was rather like a tape-recorder. Whenever he tired of this role or was prevented from writing because of preparations for another attack, or a long, mandatory trek, he would draw a Ganesh in the centre of his page. A ball-point pen was placed at the end of the podgy deity's trunk. In one of his four hands (the others, according to tradition, should hold a large pot of honey, a broken tusk, and a purse), he put a spiral notebook, exactly like his own, with this simple prayer inscribed on its cover: 'Oh Ganesh, whose veins are filled with ink not blood, protect my ink, protect my blood, my life and my scripts, for my life is my scripts and my scripts are my blood.'

It was in one of these drawings, undeniable proof of a moment of doubt or boredom, that Attu heralded (there was no other word for it, the tone was so enthusiastic) what he entitled 'The incredible arrival of Devi in Mustaqeen the Great's den.'

This was surprising because Attu hadn't seen Devi since the attack at Unnao and, like everyone else in the band, thought she was quite simply dead. An upturned body, with the hands and feet tied up was the last image of her. Along with Lukka and Kalla he managed, just before the police arrived, to escape

into the ravines. Lukka proved to be bit of a sleuth, and traced Mustaqeen's tracks to join up with Vikram's men, Badru, Balo, Baladin and little Kok. Including the other men, they were now forty in the gang. This was a good number and Vikram's memory bound them together. On Dussehra, a general meeting had been held, after the guns had been blessed in a sanctuary at the bottom of the grotto. In the course of this reunion the men swore to take revenge and to unite in order to kill the Singh brothers, and provisionally they set a deadline; the end of winter, just before Holi. 'We must allow the blood to become rancid' Mustaqeen had declared, with his customary calm and solemnity. 'It is only in rancid blood that revenge can ferment.' From these poetic words the gang deduced a more straightforward message: He preferred to wait until the police had calmed down.

It is true that in spite of Vikram's death, the officers even in the most isolated police stations continued to increase their patrols. Apparently, they were being spurred into action by a big shot from Kanpur, a certain Mr. Mahendra, who was bombarding them with telegrams. The roads were strictly patrolled. Any peasant known to be supplying the gangs had been arrested, and those who didn't want to own up had been tortured. So efficient were the police that the men couldn't even go to Gwalior, as they did every year around that time, to buy more ammunition.

The rumour of what had happened to Devi at the hands of the people of Behmai, had spread as far as Mustaqeen's grotto, as it had to every corner of the Valley. To Attu's great surprise, it didn't arouse much emotion in the band, although he himself was outraged as seen in his diary. A few bandits had muttered that it would be better to kill the Singh brothers straightaway. But even before Mustaqeen could remove his pipe, Lukka, his voice even harder than before, announced that the peasants in the Valley had made up the entire story. In his opinion, the two brothers had no reason to spare Devi. Maybe they abused her and tortured her, before killing her; it was certainly their style. But they wouldn't do it in front of the whole village—they

weren't that crazy. And anyway, even if it were true, Devi couldn't possibly have survived such an ordeal.

Devi's name was no longer mentioned at the grotto of Mustaqeen after this. In his diary, Attu now referred to her as though she were dead, and recorded the few memories that he had of her. He remembered, for example, how she would stand in front of him open-mouthed, when she saw him writing. Or how it amused her to make him speak English in the evening, in front of the fire; how she followed the movement of his lips until she had succeeded in repeating the words that he tried to teach her: kiss me, thank you, I love you, tea for two and of course, son of a bitch or motherfucker. Much to Vikram's annoyance she repeated this parrot-like to all the men, laughing wildly like a child.

Agreeing with Lukka's hypothesis about Devi's end at the hands of the twins, Attu would then begin to imagine that Devi was a spirit. In his daydreams, naturally, he always had the leading role. Devi arrived in the grotto in the middle of the night, went straight to his tarpaulin, and woke him up. She was pallid, almost naked, sometimes totally so. She kissed his feet, staining them with her tears. He would take her hand, stroke her hair, and promise he would avenge her. He asked her not to speak so loudly, because he was going to look after everything, by himself. There was no need for anyone else to be involved. She nodded in agreement, and quietly returned to Yama. Attu, for his part, flew to Behmai. He never understood why it always happened in exactly the same way, but he invariably ended up as a bird; perhaps because that was how the gods and heroes in the comic strips moved when they were defending a goddess or a princess. Once he got there, he came across the two brothers who begged him to spare their lives. 'No mercy,' Attu roared, and with two shots from his old gun, one for each brother, he killed them on the spot. Their bloody remains he brought back to Devi.

And here Attu's dream always came to an end. If there was to be a follow-up, he had to decide whether Devi was dead or alive, and he could never make up his mind. Reality would then take over; the grotto where he had been rotting for more than three months now.

Nevertheless, it was Attu who saw Devi arrive one October afternoon. The irony of fate couldn't have been more evident for Lukka had been chosen to guard the hide-out with him that day. Despite thirty years in the ravines, Lukka was the one who couldn't believe his eyes.



The Baha ravine is one of the most closely guarded places in the Valley. It is possible to scan a large part of the region from the top of its gigantic cliffs. During the months that follow the monsoon, water is abundant. Springs gush from the rock-faces, forming small mountain streams of red water at the bottom of the gorges, which eventually disappear into the sands of the river. With the water level rising and currents and whirlpools, navigation becomes extremely treacherous. The peasants keep off the region of Bahu at this time of year. The only exceptions being the pilgrims to the Ganesh temple, close to the sands. There are only a few seasoned ferrymen left then, who are usually responsible for bringing supplies to the bandits and news from the Valley.

From the same lookout, Attu and Lukka were observing the river. When they saw a small boat moving through the channel, and a peasant woman in a faded sari jump onto the sands, they weren't unduly worried. They presumed it was one of the deserters they saw from time to time in the gorge, who came despite all odds to worship at the Ganesh temple. But she walked past the temple without stopping and disappeared into a thicket.

Lukka and Attu screwed up their eyes, to scan the bushes one by one, and the furrows of the gorge. Their minds worked alike but they said nothing. Neither one moved, for they needed strength to eradicate this thought, to push it to the back of their minds.

Suddenly, they perceived a thin shadow moving deftly and suspiciously like a preying cat. It unfolded slowly, from underneath some thorny bushes, about two hundred metres below them.

According to Attu, what really caught their attention was the butt of the machine-gun, and above all the red head-band. 'It was like a blood-stain, a blood-stain advancing like a reproach being levelled at us. Lukka took aim with his machine-gun. He was just about to fire. But Devi cried out. A strange cry, bizarre, like the sounds of animals hidden in the forest. She mustn't have remembered who I was, for it was Lukka's name she called out. Then I don't know what happened, but Lukka stopped dead in his tracks. He couldn't fire.'

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When Mustaqeen heard about Devi's arrival, he became very nervous. He insisted on getting all dressed up and only allowed her in, once his moustache was perfectly glossed and combed. This way, at least outwardly, he seemed to have recovered his customary serenity. He was settled on his mat, and naturally, pulling on his pipe.

Expressing great regret over Vikram's death, he declared, 'He was more than a friend. He was a son; a son who disobeyed me. I told him not to help the Singh brothers. I was certain they were in cahoots with the police. But he helped them, and now he is dead.'

Devi said nothing. She was sitting right opposite him, her back straight as a rod, the Mauser on her shoulder, cross-legged like any other bandit. Her silence astonished Mustaqeen, and he went on:

'What are you doing here?'

His dismissive manner didn't upset Devi, she merely replied with another question:

'You know my past?'

Mustaqeen passed his forefinger lazily across his moustache, a sure sign of enormous hesitation on his part.

He played with words:

'Your past is very long and very unstable; complicated and wild, like every other bandit's past...'

'Don't act innocent,' Devi cut in sharply.' You know very well what happened to me.'

'Tell me your version of things, so that I can compare.'

For a second, the irony of it all made her eyes narrow, and Attu was convinced that Devi was going to lose her composure. 'But she hardened,' he comments, 'hardened from within, like a sword that has been dipped in fire.' She looked Mustaqeen straight in the eye and said: 'Are you sure you want to hear it?' He really didn't know what to say. So like the itinerant storytellers, she sat back and began the story of everything that had happened to her at the hands of the people of Behmai. She didn't go into too much detail, but didn't hide anything either. The horror of it all still came through. The most striking feature was her voice. It created the impression that she was going to disgorge every wretched happening but in a calm and even manner. When she finally stopped, no one dared utter a word; dared even to move. Mustaqeen's heart was in his boots. Only one person remained unruffled throughout: Lukka. 'When he saw that we were all speechless, he began to shout: "Long live Vikram!" So we all stood up and bellowed after him: "Long live Vikram!"" Devi didn't turn a hair, she just waited until we had finished. Then she looked Mustaqeen straight in the eye, and coldly declared: 'You are going to help me take my revenge.' Hearing this Mustaqeen became irritated. He suddenly started to twitch and made strange faces, because of which his moustache also started to stir, almost like an insect's feelers. His nose followed suit. Mustaqeen finally spat out what he had wanted to say since Devi had entered the grotto:

'You bring bad luck, Phoolan Devi. It is because of you that Vikram is dead.'

'You are wrong Mustaqeen the Great. I have known too much misery myself to bring it upon others.'

She said all this in the same cold, cutting tone, not calm but without a trace of anger. Mustaqeen looked perturbed, and started to prevaricate: 'I know, I know.' The Singh brothers are dogs, and you want to take your revenge.

'And do you have any idéa how?'
'That's your job.'
'You too, if you want to take your revenge.'
'That's my business.'
He put down his pipe and joined his hands, thereby indicating that the discussion was over. But Devi wasn't having any of it. Before he had even begun to stand up, she added:
'You must take me into your gang!'
'I don't want any women here!'
'I will take my revenge alone then, Mustaqeen the Great.'
'I said I would avenge Vikram's death, and I will!'
Seeing his anger all his men instinctively closed their hands over the barrel of their guns. Only Devi stood, immobile. But from the expression on her face, Attu realized that her cartridge pouch was in fact empty.
He wasn't the only one to notice it. At that very moment, a deep voice resounded from the back of the grotto, and addressed Devi:
'Alone, you cannot succeed.'
'The man cut Mustaqeen short.
'She needs a gang. Her own gang.'
A murmur rippled through a group of bandits. Devi stood her ground, as did Mustaqeen. The murmuring stopped almost immediately. The man continued despite the absolute silence that now held sway:
'Give her some men, Mustaqeen the Great. And you, Devi, leave some of your vengeance to Mustaqeen.'
Tall and thin, it was Man Singh, the best shooter in the gang after Mustaqeen, and by far its quietest member. Until that day, Attu had never heard him put two words together. He couldn't believe this, any more than the rest of the gang could. Only Mustaqeen registered no surprise. He simply looked perplexed, and started to fiddle with the end of his moustache. Devi, on the other hand, was in complete control. With a cynical eye, she looked the stranger up and down. He didn't appear to mind and smiled. It was a smile that even melted Lukka's irritation as he stood behind Attu, as well as that of the men who

stood rigidly in the shadows. It must have equally dissolved Devi's distrust, for she didn't react when the man pointed the way out, saying:

'Come over here and let us talk. You and me...'



She followed him. Neither spoke a word on the way. It seemed as if their fate had already been decided; perhaps many moons ago, maybe even since the beginning of time. In any case, Man Singh appeared to be anxious to conclude the deal.

'You cannot remain alone. If only for lack of ammunition.'

'I have all I need!'

'Do you expect me to believe that...'

He continued smiling. She wanted to show off, to shake the barrel of her Mauser under his nose:

'Let's see about that...'

Man Singh brought his hand down on the barrel:

'Not with me.'

He wasn't smiling anymore. Coming outside, Man Singh continued:

'I will come with you. I will give you everything you need.'

She said nothing; just scratched the ground with the tip of her shoe. Then she exclaimed:

'I don't want any man's body on mine ever again! The first one who tries to touch me...'

'I am not asking you for anything.'

Man Singh was smiling again. It was impossible to hold his gaze. 'First of all, who are you?' she mumbled.

'Mustaqeen's right-hand man. An enemy of the Thakurs like you and your people, son of a milkman .'

'What's your name!'

'Man Singh.'

She looked thoughtful. He went on:

'You don't know me, but I know who you are.'

'So, go on then...'

He wasn't put off by her grating voice, but quietly answered:

'You are a strong woman, stronger than many men. You know how to handle guns. There aren't many like you in the Valley. I have much respect for you. You and I would be equals.'

'Shut up,' she said cuttingly, digging her heel into the ground. 'Don't say those things, I have heard them all before.'

'I don't want to console you. Only help you. You are alone and...'

'I don't want to listen.'

Devi's voice had changed. She seemed to be on the verge of bursting into tears. She looked like a gazelle ready to take flight, indecisive, nervous and incredibly fragile. A kind of tenderness came over her, because she looked up and said:

'Do you really believe what you are saying? Do you swear to it?'

Her voice was soft, her expression gentle. Man Singh immediately swore he did. Devi shook her head several times and then faltering, turned in the direction of the grotto, where Mustaqeen sat unfluttered, smoking his pipe.

'Go on,' Man Singh urged her. 'Don't be afraid, tell him we are going away together. Mustaqeen the Great is strong, he doesn't need me. And it's a fair deal. He knows that.'

Returning to the men, Man Singh melted into the background. She approached the mat alone, but before she could even crouch Mustaqeen declared:

'Take Vikram's men with you.'

Pride had all but disappeared from his eyes. All that remained between Devi and him was the tranquility of the agreement.

They both joined their hands and brought them to their mouths. Then Mustaqeen took a packet of vermilion powder out of his pocket. He took a pinch of it, and signalled Devi to come closer. She offered him her forehead in the same way as a docile child would have done. She didn't even flinch when, with the flat of his thumb, Mustaqeen drew the red circle between her eyebrows, which joined together them forever in the spirit of revenge and he ordered her to go in peace.

If we are to believe Attu, the police let up towards mid-November. No one was fooled by this sudden discretion, neither the bandits themselves, nor the authorities. Both the hunter and the hunted needed to catch their breath.

Of all the bandits in the Valley, Devi and Man Singh were certainly the ones to take the most advantage of this unexpected respite. None of the men had any money, and ammunition was scarce. To survive the couple of months until the day of revenge, Man Singh was going to attack some of the more isolated villages. Lukka, who had followed them was certain that the gang would be destroyed during the first raid.

On several occasions, Attu thought Devi was going to chase him out of the gang. But the curses that Lukka mumbled from one day to the other, had no effect on her. She walked on boldly, self-possessed, and untouched like the Goddess herself. The number of omens that continually crossed her path was incredible. For example, one evening as the band were sleeping under the stars, and the cold was at its peak, Devi caught a glimpse of a young panther sneaking in under her tarpaulin. It settled at her feet, as though wanted to warm itself. They had to be extremely cautious when they brought it back into the maze of brushwood, still half-asleep. Another morning, she discovered on waking up, a small, yellow snake, highly poisonous, nestled in the hollow of her shoulder. Once again she remained calm, and managed to gently lift it off her. 'In fact, it was that particular day,' Attu points out, 'the day of the snake' to use the expression in his notes, that Lukka stopped pestering Devi with his recriminations.

As proof of the power of these signs, the first attack went off without any hitch whatsoever. The village had been plundered within the hour. The villagers and bandits in fact struck a deal. They informed the bandits that the police were lying low, at least until the release of the hostages that had been taken by Malkhan.

Man Singh and Devi decided there and then to unpitch and move. After a two week trek and much debate, they chose to

set up camp, at least for a while, in a small gorge on the outskirts of Thakur country, exactly halfway between Unnao and Rajpur, the two small towns where Vikram and Devi had spent their last days together.

Truly it must be said that, it would be difficult to imagine a more beautiful hiding place than Mustaqeen's grotto. Surrounded by a corrie of high mountain peaks, it was enclosed by a gully from where it was possible to dominate most of the Valley. The narrow pass, at this time of the year, was spanned by energetic torrents. Branches of bright green shrubs trailed through it.

To begin with, Devi and Man Singh decided to raid three Thakur villages. The raid was an unprecedented success. The police didn't show up. The booty was superb. So Man Singh asked two young Mallahs from the village of Shama to convey a message to his arms dealer in Kanpur. He managed to negotiate the purchase of ammunition and spare parts through these mediators. Not one to miss an opportunity to criticise, Lukka pointed out that he also needed to replace the men's uniforms as quickly as possible and above all their shoes, completely worn out. As money was running out, Devi suggested attacking the two roads closest to them. They were not as busy as Highway 2, but they still had their share of lorries and small trucks each night.

The information the peasants had passed on was precise, and although the attacks on Route no. 25 and Route no. 3 were not as lucrative as those on the National Highway 2, they went off without a hitch. After four nights, the band had gathered enough bank notes to buy uniforms and shoes for seventeen men. The jewellery and watches weren't worth very much, but Attu reckoned they would provide enough food for the men for several weeks. By the beginning of December, everything had been arranged.

Now all the band had to do was calmly wait for the date fixed for the revenge. Although the nights were becoming colder, the days were still glorious, under the soft, glossy leaves of the tree that sheltered the parakeets. At night the tree was no less

enchanting, as each leaf reflected, like a miniscule light, the dull sparkle of the moon. Even if that peepal tree was wild, it was obvious that the gods rested in its shade. As soon as the gang had settled there, Devi placed at its roots, a jugful of water and milk, to ensure that they would receive the powerful blessings that lingered within its branches, and soothe Vikram's soul while it waited to be avenged.

Once the peasants heard about this, they came in droves to the gully that closed off the gorge, to make all kinds of offerings. It soon became clear that they wanted to honour Devi as much as the tree itself. In their adoration there was an aura of tragedy that seemed to follow her everywhere, the shadow of Vikram's death perhaps. But Devi had a talent for being unassuming and discreet, and spoke to the peasants about themselves:

'I steal from the rich to give to the poor,' she declared one evening. 'It is for you that I mount attacks on the Thakurs'. And as if to prove her sincerity, she grabbed an enormous wad of notes and pressed them into the hands of the oldest visitor present.

Man Singh, as usual, remained distant and smiling, content to slowly smooth his long straight hair. The next morning he stood before the band, his forehead wearing a wide red head-band, exactly like Devi's. 'Now they look like brother and sister,' Attu noted. A little further on in his diary, he added that with his serious demeanour, his thin body, his long hair and head-band, Man Singh now looked like a western God, in fact a Christ whose church he had visited one day, behind the big cinema in Kanpur.

It is a precious comment, as in his diary Attu rarely speaks of Man Singh. It is as if he made a conscious decision not to, for fear that one day Man Singh would make out what he written. Other than his talent as a shooter, he only hints at the reasons that forced him to take to the ravines. One of his brothers had been assassinated by the police, suspected of a robbery he didn't commit. 'From time to time,' Attu wrote, 'Man Singh appears to be sulking; he daydreams. I am sure he is thinking about his brother, as unfairness is something he

cannot bear. For the rest of the time, he smiles. He is never angry, or even jealous when the people of Shama gather underneath the tree to kiss Devi's feet, and shout: "Long live Devi! Long live Vikram!" He hardly speaks to anyone, apart from Devi, and then only to discuss the attacks. Or else to answer her when she asks him about their revenge. But he doesn't like to speak about that. He often gets angry, and so the discussion usually ends in a fight.'

Around mid-December, Attu stopped writing in his diary, something unusual for him. He even abandoned his accounting, something that was dear to his heart. When he resumed on 14 December, he wrote a single, terse sentence. 'Now they sleep under the same tarpaulin'. Then he daubed his page with a gigantic Ganesh with a smile that, for once, wasn't very jovial. Three days later he described in minute detail, the events of the couple of days before. 'Devi seems to be increasingly irritated. She only talks about revenge now. However, Man Singh answers that she must wait till Holi and for Mustaqeen's agreement. She doesn't listen to him. The people of Simra told her that they knew where the man was, who boasted of having stolen the chloroform used to kidnap her. They traced him down in a small market town, near Unnao. She wanted to go there and kill him. Man Singh tried to calm her down; he even brought her to the other end of the ravine to speak to her in private. Man Singh spoke exactly as Vikram had when he was alive. The men would have to make a lot of money if she wanted them to follow her to take revenge. For the moment it was better to keep a low profile anyway. She insisted that she was tired of waiting, as indeed was Vikram's soul. The proof of this was that it visited her each night in her dreams. Man Singh looking sad asked her 'Even when you sleep beside me?' She remained stubbornly quiet. So he looked up at the mountain peaks, and said, 'I will avenge your Vikram. But damn it, your men have wives and children. Think about them from time to time if you want them to continue kissing your feet as if you were a queen!' She looked thoughtful and finally asked him, 'Do you have any news from Mustaqeen?' Man Singh answered that the peasants had seen

him in the region of the river basin, and that he thought it wouldn't be long before he caught up with them. She now raised her head, and added: 'I agree to give the men more money. As soon as we make contact with Mustaqeen, we will plan an attack with him. But in the meantime, I intend to look after my own business. And I don't need you for that!'

'Obviously,' Attu continues two days later,' Man Singh wanted to take care of Devi's affairs, and in the end, the whole gang became involved.' There were no problems capturing the man who purloined the chloroform. In this hamlet, only his wife and he were home; the others were in the fields. Devi began by hitting the woman, kicking her and raining blows and with the barrel of her gun. She thundered she would kill her husband before her very eyes. The man begged Devi to leave her alone; he kept screaming, 'She didn't do anything. I am the one who stole the chloroform from the cops!' As for the woman she allowed herself to be beaten badly, probably thinking to herself that the more blows she endured, the better her husband's chances would be. But Devi didn't give a damn, for when she was tired of hitting her, she lifted up her head and said: 'Look!' Then coldly she shot a bullet through her husband's head. It was a horrible sight. In fact, the woman turned away. 'I didn't feel too great myself. But just then, I heard Devi calling me. I was flabbergasted, she hardly ever spoke to me. In fact I had the impression she didn't even see me. Anyhow, she asked me to write a statement on a piece of paper, claiming responsibility for the murder of this guy, and the reason for it. I tore out a page and wrote as she had asked me to. Then we pinned the paper to the corpse and went home as quickly as possible. We didn't steal anything, Devi said we mustn't, as she wanted her revenge to be pure. We obeyed her.'

She must have been highly excited by all this, because two days later she started once more to pester Man Singh about taking revenge. She announced quite abruptly under the parakeet tree:

'Mustaqeen isn't coming; we are wasting our time. We must move on!'

'Move on, for what reason?' Man Singh asked naively.

She roared with laughter.

'To take revenge. What do you think I am talking about!'

On hearing the word, revenge, Man Singh tensed, he felt the danger. Not willing to be talked to, she immediately turned to the men and said, or rather shouted to them,

'We must move on. Let us continue. Let us punish the people of Rajpur.'

'What did they ever do to you?' Man Singh muttered.

You know very well.'

All the men were on the alert by now. They had abandoned their jacks, their card games; they were only interested in Devi. Man Singh began to sweat; a large, wet stain was spreading in the middle of his red head-band. Nonetheless, he confronted her:

'Tell us, so that we can judge whether it is worth it or not.'

'They wanted to kill Vikram.'

'They missed him!'

'But they still wanted to kill him. If they could have...'

'You are angry,' Man Singh cut in. 'And baseless anger will never get you anywhere, not even in revenge.'

'What do you know about revenge? Go on, tell us what you know...'

Man Singh pointed towards the tree. He plucked one of its leaves and simply said:

'Do you know that if we lie, while pulling a leaf off this tree, our heart and heads are fated to be ripped off in the same way...'

'So what?'

He pretended not to have heard her and went on:

'You killed the man who had stolen the chloroform and that hasn't made you any the happier!'

'When we take revenge, death tastes like salt. Vikram told me so.'

'I know what salt tastes like, I have already tasted it several times. You are wrong, Phoolan Devi. And you know it.

'Say right now that Vikram...'

Man Singh didn't let her finish. He pressed the leaf into her hand and continued:

'Forget about all that. Wait until the Holi. Make your men happy.'

'Vikram was their leader. They would be glad to kill the dogs who had shot down their leader.'

A little later, seeing Man Singh's expression, Devi burst out laughing. Between two breaths, she repeated: 'Rajpur must be punished!'

Yet again, she had found the right words effortlessly, powerful in their simplicity. And then there was her laugh, this joyous outburst, that seemed to mock everything. Not one of the men objected, not even Lukka. The spirit of revenge had now entered each one of them. Along with Man Singh, Attu was probably the only other one to feel anxious about the situation, because that evening in his diary he wrote these confused lines: 'Everyone does what Devi wants them to do. It is true, she is a little frightening, with her big, black eyes, especially when she looks straight at you. Or when she mocks you. She is awful when she is like that. They say the same thing about the goddesses; that they break into laughter as they take a man's soul. In any case, it has been decided. We are going to attack Rajpur. I don't know what's wrong with Devi. Here, she has everyone eating out of her hand: Man Singh, Baladin, Kalla, me, all Vikram's men, even the old ones, those two brutes, Badru and Balo, even Lukka. He too is bewitched, he hasn't opened his mouth. It is incredible. And through it all, she lives like a queen under the parakeet's tree.'



A turning point in the life of Inspector-General Mahendra was 20 December 1980. That evening, he took an unusual step; he asked his handyman to fix up a bed for him in his office. Then he phoned his wife to tell her that because of extra work he wouldn't be home that night. At the other end of the line, Mrs. Mahendra's particularly acid tones made it quite clear that he wouldn't be easily forgiven for this decision.

Coming n top of the message he had just received from Rajpur police station, this was all too much for Mahendra. He did something which he immediately realized would have serious consequences, yet couldn't prevent himself from doing it all the same: he hung up on his wife. Never, in his twenty-five year marriage, had he ever lost control to that extent. Immediately after this action he realised it was indeed excessive, even if justified, and he breathed as deeply as he could several times. The awaited calm was slow in coming, and he was instead overcome with the crazy hope that maybe Mrs. Mahendra thought the line had been cut, as happened from time to time, and that subsequently she would call him back. The telephone remained silent however, and after ten minutes he stopped tormenting himself, lay down and started to reflect on the situation.

It must have been the first time that he hadn't worked in front of his desk. But he knew the affair by heart. He had read it and reread it for at least two hours, analysed it, dissected the long telegram sent by superintendent Gupta, of the Rajpur station. Despite its conciseness, the telegram didn't contradict in any way, Gupta's telephonic remarks of a few hours before that. Mahendra thus believed that the superintendent hadn't made up anything. At the time, Mahendra hadn't had any doubts. His voice alone, in spite of the line's disturbance, had betrayed extreme anxiety. Not only that, but Gupta had refused to speak to anyone else but him. He had been handed over to Jain to begin with, petrified, but bursting with curiosity at the mere mention of the word Rajpur. Gupta had managed to hedge his questions and demanded to speak to Mahendra. From his very first remarks, the Inspector-General understood that this was a cry for help. 'Do something, quickly. I don't think she will come back here, but she is a madwoman, a dangerous madwoman. Anything could happen.' The Inspector-General was so bothered by this last remark that he almost forgot the rest of what had been said. Surely, his subordinate had been touched in the head fuelled by newspaper reports, for it was an undisputed, irrefutable fact, that the madwoman Gupta had just

spoken of was dead since thirteenth August, five and a half months ago. (To be completely sure, Mahendra calculated the time on his fingers). She had been drowned in the backwash of the river, just before Unnao. He could produce from his chest of drawers, if necessary, three reports all confirming that this was the case. Naturally, they didn't have the body, but at this time of the year, the river was choked with mud and water. To find a body in its course now, was unheard of.

So on this dreadful afternoon of twentieth December, Mahendra therefore decided that before getting over-anxious he would really have to determine whether Gupta was one of those spirits with a gross imagination, who was poisoning the hierarchy of the police ranks. It would have come as a surprise, for he had personally appointed Gupta to the Rajpur station three months ago. He remembered that the government had advised him to place a solid man in that particular position, which the proximity of both Mallahs and Thakurs now rendered even more perilous. Just after assuming charge there, Gupta had sent him an alarming report concerning the behaviour of the Thakurs. According to him, the number of humiliations the Thakurs usually heaped upon the Mallahs was greatly increasing and so also the risk of what was piously termed in bureaucratic language, as 'communal riots,' or more simply a massacre between the two castes.

He asked Jain to bring him the file on Gupta, and imagined his burning curiosity to have reached an unbearable stage by now.

The sight of Jain solemnly entering his office with the file on this dark 20 December 1980, only added to the immense satisfaction of the Inspector-General. Jain had never been so efficient at finding a document. For once he didn't seem to be anxious to leave Mahendra. Uninvited, he sat down in front of him, a beam on his face. While his boss calmly opened the folder, he didn't take his eyes off him, or lose any of his unctuous smile.

Mahendra wasn't going to have any of it, however. He dismissed Jain in an exceptionally dry manner and engrossed himself in his papers.

Gupta's file was perfectly ordered, as indeed were all the

others. Mahendra congratulated himself yet again on having established such an irreproachable bureaucracy in his district. After reading the file for only a few minutes, there was no doubt about it: superintendent Gupta was anything but an imaginative spirit, anymore than he was a coward, having been decorated at the age of twenty-two for heroic service in the war against Pakistan.

Mahendra had never, until this moment, shown anything but the most clear-cut determination—at least in his official position. However, on closing the Gupta file, his thoughts were divided in a way never before. On the one hand he was overjoyed that he could finally present Mrs. Mahendra with a contrary example of the people of Mirzapur. She had always confronted him with the common saying that they were cowardly besides being boastful. But on the other hand, he was completely devastated. In short, it appeared that his pet hate, the girl really was alive, and more dangerous than ever.

He immediately called the station at Rajpur, and got through, miraculously in only half an hour. As soon as he got Gupta on the line, he commanded him to confirm his story by telegram, sticking religiously to what he considered to be the most salient points. He wanted it on his desk within forty-eight hours. Gupta simply repeated: 'Look, do something quickly. I am not speaking for myself nor for my men. She probably won't come back here again. Yet, I know from what I have seen and heard, that she will start all over again. I am sure of it...'—'The telegram first,' Mahendra cut in. 'Then we will see.' He hung up.

The telegram arrived a few hours later, as night was falling. Its contents didn't surprise the Inspector-General. He had already guessed that what had happened in Rajpur was extremely serious. From the telegram and the notes he had taken during their telephone conversation, Mahendra could already see the report, cut and dried, which he would receive two days later from Rajpur.

On the morning of twentieth December, just before dawn, a gang of seventeen men led by a young girl wearing jeans and a red head-band, encircled the higher Thakur quarters. Ninety houses were pillaged, then burnt to the ground. Fuelled by the

explosion of several kerosene stoves, the fire nearly spread to the rest of the town. The Mallahs of Rajpur hadn't remained inactive during the whole business. As soon as the gang arrived, they had surrounded the area and prevented, throughout the entire raid, any contact with the lower district where the police station was to be found. The bandits had been extremely brutal. The gangsters had molested the women, the old men and even the young children. On several occasions the woman with the red head-band had threatened to kill them in front of their parents, if they didn't hurry up and give her their jewellery and banknotes. When this lightening raid was over, (it hadn't even lasted three quarters of an hour) the woman leading the gang had picked up a loudspeaker and shouted her name—Phoolan Devi—then screamed over and over again, her men following suit: 'Long live Vikram Mallah. Down with the dogs of Behmai and the Singh brothers!' While the first few houses took flame she began yelling into the loudspeaker once more: 'I am Devi, justice and revenge. I take from the rich to give to the poor. Tremble, Thakur dogs. Death to the jackals of Behmai. We will get even with the last one of you; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I am Devi, she, who sees justice is done!'

There was no question about it; it was the girl. Everything pointed to this fact. The red head-band, the loudspeaker, the jeans, the reference to the Singh brothers and to Vikram Mallah.

Mahendra had to find a solution. It was the second time a murderer had been resurrected in less than six months. And as Gupta had predicted, this one promised to be far more dangerous than any of the previous ones. For a start, it must have been five years now since there was arson and plunder in the Valley. A considerable number of houses had been attacked—an entire quarter. Then there was the question of what the girl had said. That was the worst part of it.

Till late that night, a strange violet hue from the night-light filled the office. Mahendra stretched out on his camp bed. Here, in minute detail, he went over the series of events which by some twist of fate—he preferred not to think about it—had led him to sleep elsewhere for the first time in his married life. He refused

to see whether it was a pretext or whether he had made a legitimate decision.

Mahendra also chose to concentrate on the more obscure points of Gupta's story. The first one was concerning the man with a red head-band. Despite the sudden facility with which gang leaders had recently been reincarnated, it was obvious that it couldn't possibly be Vikram Mallah. The original photo of his corpse, purple under the night-lamp, was spread out in front of him like a hunting trophy; on the right half of the cupboard which held the reports. The stranger in the red head-band must be a newcomer to the gang. A stooge, no doubt. A new lover. At the mercy of the girl, he was imitating her, following her blindly. Some well-thought out interrogation would surely be enough to find out who he was; threats and beatings, of course, if necessary.

By a strange association of ideas, Mahendra thought once more about the Singh brothers. Since they had handed over Vikram Mallah's corpse and guns to the district police of Unnao, no one had heard any more from them. The Inspector-General was amazed at their discreetness, and had even feared at one stage that they would blackmail him. He had even prepared a riposte; a series of counter-reports written by Jain, proving that it was the twins that had assassinated Vikram Mallah. The moment they were put under any kind of pressure they would be used. There was nothing immoral about this. It was the absolute truth.

To explain the reappearance of the girl was another story, however. He would have to admit, at least to himself, that she hadn't drowned. At the same time, it was impossible that the Singh brothers could have spared her. Even less so while she was alive, or rather when Vikram Mallah was alive. Mahendra was having a hard time figuring it all out! But supposing she didn't drown, how the hell did she get away from them? In the Valley it was harder to find two rogues more cruel, more crafty, than the two brothers—that was a well-known fact. During their negotiations about the execution of Vikram Mallah, they had stated their intentions clearly to Jain; they wanted the girl too.

The police and twins had decided that they would execute their rivals down by the river, precisely because the backwash at this time of year offered no shelter, not even to the best of swimmers. So there was only one possibility left. Either the police in charge of the Unnao area had lied and the girl was spared. Or for some unfathomable reason, the Singh brothers had refused to bump her off.

Quite content with his powerful reasoning, Mahendra stood up and went over to his desk, to collate the decisions he would have to then put into effect the very next morning. He would begin by establishing whether the police at Unnao had told the truth or not. He would summon Jain as soon as he could, demand explanations and reports.

As it turned out, Mahendra couldn't remember exactly where their village was situated. According to Gupta, the strange name of Behmai had been repeated several times by the girl. He would have to find it at once if he wanted to impress Jain. Mahendra took a map of the region out of his drawer, and unfolded it on his desk. Hard as he looked, he still couldn't find the name Behmai. It must be a hamlet. A common, formless, grouping of small huts and houses. A place without a past, where the Thakurs lived, as they had always done, quietly and arrogantly, proud of their caste and their land, of what they considered to be their wealth. Mahendra noted down, to ask Jain for a recent map of the region.

He returned to lie down but he found it difficult to get back to sleep. At two o'clock in the morning he was still twisting and turning in his bed, unsure whether it was the tea he had continuously sipped throughout his contemplations, or the absence (perhaps detrimental, in the final analysis) of Mrs: Mahendra, that was causing this discomfort. For some strange reason, he no longer burned with curiosity to know what the girl looked like; having severely curbed anything that might awaken his imagination. No, it wasn't the girl herself that tormented him at the moment, it was what she had said. It was the first time she had ever spoken. And with good cause. She had called for revenge, for justice. In the depths of this troubled

night, Mahendra thought he heard this voice of revenge call several times, resonating behind the crackling, anxious tones of superintendent Gupta, squealing in his ear. This time it wasn't Shakespeare that the Inspector-General .resorted to so that he could quieten his fears. His eyes wide open, staring at the mildewed ceiling, he repeated over and over again the same verses of the Mahabharata, that the gods had uttered when they saw the old Naga kings fall and their palaces and temples sink into the jungle. 'If destruction is the result, it isn't because we brandished arms. But because we called what was evil, good and what was good, evil'.

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Despite the difficult night, Mahendra tended to his business briskly. The very next day, reminiscent of the earlier attacks on the highway, the Inspector-General's offices were buzzing with telephone calls from the tiniest stations all over the country. Following his boss' orders, Jain had asked for detailed reports on even the most unimportant robberies, violence, extortions or pilfering, which might constitute in any way, an act of organized crime. Even the humblest of policemen felt that this was an opportunity to be promoted. The offices in Kanpur were flooded with phone calls and telegrams, each one with its little report. The obvious risk was that the girl would pop up everywhere. Sticking to his routine, Mahendra set up a group to sift through the tiniest pieces of information. A map was hung up, on which these small crimes were indicated, as in a war situation, by coloured flags and according to their category. In reality, the result remained derisory. The fact was, the bandits had realised that the hunt had resumed, and they weren't coming out of hiding anymore.

However, after one week, Jain's spirits lifted. A superintendent from a station near the river Betwa had proved, with a photograph to boot, that the man with the red head-band could only be Man Singh, a dangerous bandit, a milkman

in his region and a remarkable shooter, which had won him the admiration of Mustaqeen the Great, whom he seconded.

Jain immediately transmitted this photo to Rajpur. There, the victims of the attack on twentieth December were absolutely certain; it was the man with the red head-band.

He rushed off to announce this astounding break through to Mahendra. Naturally, the Inspector-General chose to hide his satisfaction. He tried to appear as stiff as he possibly could, and retorted:

'And the girl, do we know what she looks like?'

Jain sighed at length:

'No, There's still nothing. Nothing more.'

'What do they say about her?'

Mahendra lowered his gaze.

'Nothing, Jain sighed once more.'

'And the Thakurs?'

'Nothing either.'

Although, Jain was very familiar with the various convolutions of Mahendra's mind, this time he couldn't even hazard a guess as to what he was leading up to. The Inspector-General continued to mutter, his mouth weary and disdainful. 'And yet at the same time, everyone used to speak a lot about her in the countryside... They even made up songs. Now that she has come back to life, there is nothing. Nothing, anywhere... It's almost as if... it's almost as their wild imagination is running out...'

But Mahendra continued, cynical as ever.

'And the Singh brothers? Do you have any news of the Singh brothers?'

'No news. All that we know is, that the girl is looking for them too. She tortured the peasants to find out where they were.'

Mahendra stiffened immediately.

'Where did these attacks take place?'

'They weren't serious,' Jain smiled. 'Mere pilfering. They took place between Kalpi and Etawah. But we do know it was her. She gave her name each time, and screamed revenge, as she did in Rajpur. She also asked where the twins were. According to the people there...'

He, in turn, hesitated to say the word ravine, and tried to imitate Mahendra's gesture, but realized immediately that with his short and squat hand he could only manage a sort of wriggling, reminiscent of a puppeteer. Lowering his eyes, he continued.

'It would appear that she only attacks villages that have been indicated to her as...'

Mahendra sat bolt upright in his chair.

'You yourself have said, that nobody knows where the two brothers are. But somebody must know in the Valley, as the girl is hot on their trail. And if there are people who know and who are talking in the bargain, then you should know!'

Mahendra's voice had steadily risen, a fact that must have annoyed him, because Jain saw him taking a deep breath before continuing on a more even tone:

'Throughout this whole affair, there has been far too much silence from those who normally make far too much noise.'

He had begun to leaf through his telephone book again.

Jain stood in embarrassed silence for what appeared to be a long time. As usual he didn't know whether to go or to stay. In desperation, he decided to unfold the most recent map of the region which was on the corner of the desk. He had finally received it from Delhi, and now he started looking for Behmai on it. Mahendra, his expression harder than ever, reached out for the map:

'Before the week is out, I want to know where the Singh brothers are.'

'Well, in any case, they aren't in their village,' Jain answered calmly. 'I have two reports on my desk, both counter-signed by the district head, stating that for at least three months now, the Singh brothers haven't set foot in their home.'

If Mahendra had been put out by his subordinate's sudden composure, he didn't show it, for he insisted:

'I am giving you one week to find them.'

Then he added, his mouth tightening in what could only be described as an expression of the most bitter resentment:

'They betrayed us.'

'The killing of the girl wasn't part of the deal. It was

the brothers who wanted her hide, not us.'

His hand lingered on a typed list. His index finger slowly moved upwards through a series of names eventually coming to rest on a name encircled in red that Jain reading the names upside down by this fact alone, recognized immediately: it was the direct line to the Chief Minister.

Mahendra saw that he had caught on. Just before he picked up the receiver he said:

'From now on, we are no longer alone. I am going to ask for special units. We are going to have to work with Delhi.'

He pointed to the ceiling, as if he were speaking to the gods.

It was unbelievable, Jain remembers. The proud, conceited Mahendra putting on these fawning, wimpy airs. He, the greatest maniac for power and secrecy that had ever been known in the history of Inspector-Generals, the Great Mahendra, was now suddenly descending to the level of a junior civil servant, throwing in the towel and referring the case to others. There he was calling the Central Government to come to his rescue. Nevertheless, Jain had learnt a long time ago, not to trust the Inspector-General. The after-effects were immediate. That very evening, he too slept at the office.

## *85*

The call to Delhi hadn't only been an empty threat in order to impress Jain. With the help of the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the Inspector-General asked for help from the Central Government at the beginning of January 1981, which he obtained in two different forms. First of all, they quickly sent 'Special Units,' or trained commandos, as they were called in the technocratic language already common in the ministries, so that they could 'impose order, in case of turbulence in rural zones.' Secondly, he extracted from the bureaucrats in Delhi the promise of extra funds for his own men if the situation worsened.

Mahendra now set about drawing up a plan of action to

submit to their chief. Not surprisingly, he meant to present himself as the sole instigator of what he called, with unexpected subtlety, the 'Anti-Dacoit Operation.'

Perhaps this foolish title could have been attributed to exhaustion setting in. It is true that the long days he spent at work were beginning to increasingly tire him out, and the troubled sleep that followed even more so.

As for his married life, it had resumed its usual calm routine, and Mrs. Mahendra no longer made bitter accusations against him. The Inspector-General had managed to establish with her, what he chose to call, a suitable gentleman's agreement. He came home every third evening. But his wife had also thought of a very effective reprisal ('revenge' in fact Mahendra thought, increasingly haunted by the idea of the girl). Most of those evenings, she went to the cinema.

That is why the Inspector-General's nights were so agitated. True, he fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. But he dreamt; he had nightmares. They almost always took the same form, and exhausted him even more than his hard day's work.

After a few days, Mahendra had to accept that this dream—although it would perhaps be better to call it 'a sleeping movie' but the Inspector-General shunned this term—in fact, comprised of creatures remarkably well-endowed, with generous, shapely, breasts, including Mrs. Mahendra when she was young. Despite feeling disgusted, he came to the conclusion that he would just have to attribute divine powers to these dreams—as many great minds in India and elsewhere did. Perhaps, he had even unwittingly made progress in his investigations. After all, maybe the girl had large breasts.

Even if he tried to speak about her as little as possible, he could only think about the girl these days. At the same time, the ravines had never been calmer. The dacoits went even further underground, put off by the Special Units. The network of informers and suppliers became so suspect that several leaders, thinking there was a link between the two, resumed the traditions of Moghul India, and didn't swallow a single curry unless it had been touched by two or three tasters.

The last piece of information which brought the Inspector-General satisfaction was that the journalists were also lying low. With a rare skill which, in Mahendra's opinion might even earn him a promotion, superintendent Gupta had succeeded in stifling the entire Rajpur incident. The newspapers had only devoted a few, innocuous articles to the whole affair, in which the name of the girl was simply mentioned without any fictitious attempts. As for the arrival of the Special Units, the journalists had treated it in the same, discreet manner. The operation had been truly presented artfully and with ambiguity, in fact as a simple training mission. In short, imaginary powers would appear to have been dampened in all quarters. Except unfortunately, in the nocturnal unconsciousness of Inspector-General Mahendra.

Towards the end of the month of January, his nights became less turbulent and his dreams became clearer. Now there were only ill-matched, vague, nipples attached to imprecise faces, which eventually dissolved into other obscure thoughts. As a result, the Inspector-General woke up feeling more composed as a rule. In the cool, blue dawn, he even managed to take stock of all the progress he had made during the past year. For example, he thought to himself that it was around the same time the year before, that the Guffiakhar attack had taken place. He realised that it hadn't even taken him six months to get rid of the culprit responsible for this crime, the dangerous Vikram Mallah. The attack, was doubly effective, as by the same token he had brought the dreaded Singh brothers under control.

Mahendra congratulated himself on his small, virile world. Every morning, both the telegrams and the reports were meticulously analysed, then matched up. The map of criminal activity was scrupulously kept up to date, although there were hardly any further little flags to move. Information was deposited into impeccable files, and classified according to importance. What other district, what other State, could boast of a police service so artfully governed? What's more, since Mahendra had obtained the Special Units for his territory, his counterparts in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh were shaking with terror, fearing the attacks would start up again. in their ravines. They had

requested, in fact, were clamouring for more funds. But it was too late! For the time being, Delhi was taking no notice of their demands. So there was a good chance that if the girl decided to come out of hiding, it would be in these towns where the police, through lack of means and chronic negligence, remained particularly lethargic. On the other hand, the police were on edge in Mahendra's district, especially in the countryside, and in the more isolated and desolate police stations. A close-meshed net had now been cast over the ravines. And even if it didn't stretch to the footpaths, the crevices, the narrow passes and the secret roads known only to the bandits, all the places they were obliged to pass through were being carefully watched. The fords, bridges, village markets, train stations, the great temples of the Goddess Kali, Hanuman and Ganesh. Mahendra would stake his life on it. Although thin as a reed, supple and treacherous as a cobra, the girl wouldn't escape this time.

It was on one of these clear, blue mornings at the end of January, so conducive to meditation and inner peace, that the switchboard operator carelessly gave Jain, instead of Mahendra, a message of the utmost importance. It was from Sultanpur, an enormous town that was situated in the centre of the Valley. On hearing the first sentence at the other end of the line, Jain's hand, poised to take notes, began to shake. His assistant presumed that he was talking to Mahendra, and endlessly repeated 'Mr. Inspector-General' in smarmy, bewildered tones. When he finally hung up, he could hardly read what he had written.

He simply couldn't believe what he had just heard. He earnestly wished Mahendra had taken the call and wondered how he was going to convey this piece of news. After a few seconds thought, he chose the same method as the Inspector-General's; absolute coldness. There was no other way out; everything that he had just heard completely overwhelmed him!

As they had been chased from the countryside, the bandits had actually had the nerve to attack a town. An hour and a half ago, the bazaar at Sultanpur had been thoroughly ransacked, by about forty men disguised as policemen. They had filed into the town, two by two, covered in dust like a squad returning from

patrol. It had been a lightening strike. At the entrance to the bazaar, the file suddenly scattered. The men at the head of it took five Thakurs on their way to work as hostages, while the rest of the gang took over the police station and kept the men there at bay. The leader identified himself immediately over the loudspeaker as the Great Mustaqeen. Then he launched into a short sermon in which he boasted of taking from the rich to give to the poor and declared that none of the backward castes, including the Harijans had anything to fear. In fact, they would even have their part of the loot once the raid was over.

So the foray began. Awnings were brought down, stalls were upturned and trampled upon, and the shopkeepers were knocked out. The bazaar was emptied out within a few minutes. All the jewellery shops were looted; some grocery stores too. The reason was obvious later on. The bandits had kept their promise, and distributed everything they had stolen to all the men from the lower castes, who had been present at the raid, although completely inactive. They handed out bags full of rice, cases of gin, whisky, rum, and other liquor. Fortunately, no one was hurt or seriously injured, apart from a jeweller who was handled violently by two young bandits. One of them, tall and thin, corresponded to the description of Man Singh. Amongst all the confusion, another bandit had left a strange document behind: a sort of diary. On first reading it, it appeared that its author had belonged to the band of Vikram Mallah, and that there was a woman in the gang at the time. Also, as the bandits were leaving Sultanpur, a little Harijan girl, only ten years old, was offered a gold chain by a young woman with short hair, also disguised as a policeman. Apart from the list of stolen goods, which was going to take a few days to complete, it was pointless to take any other information into consideration.

As soon as he had finished reading his notes, and even before he had passed them on to Mahendra, Jain called the head of the station in Sultanpur to ask him for the aforementioned diary, that had been discovered in the backstreets of the bazaar. The civil servant, still in a state of shock, sent it to the wrong address, and so it ended up with the Inspector-General of Lucknow, for

whom he had worked before his last appointment. The civil servants of Lucknow sent the package on to Kanpur without ever opening it. As a result, the document didn't reach Mahendra until the 14 February 1981, just as events, far more serious than those of Sultanpur were taking place in Behmai. The press took it upon themselves to call it, referring to a carnage that had taken place fifty-two years before and was led by Al Capone in the heart of Chicago, the 'Saint Valentine's Day Massacre.'

## *86*

That morning, Attu hadn't stopped looking at his watch. It had become a habit. But after all, it was superb. Stolen in Sultanpur it was a rich man's watch, in steel, encircled with gold. It was enormous, with a hand for the seconds and two diamonds on each side. But that particular day, everything had been carried out in a hurry. Devi had decided on this. And Attu wouldn't dream of not doing something that Devi had ordered him to do. Except perhaps to do it better, to astonish her, to dazzle her. If he ordered him to carry out the plan within minutes, he would have liked to carry it out within seconds. In fact, the evening they had decided on a date to avenge Vikram's death, he had been the first one to scream : 'Long live Vikram! 'Long live Devi.' There was a great deal between Devi and him since the ransacking of Sultanpur. That day he had resolved to become her slave. Of course, he hadn't actually said anything to her, but he was convinced that she had guessed anyway. The reason was quite simple. For the revenge attack, which was the most dangerous one of all, Devi had decided that he would be the special scout. She used the argument of the narrowness of the path and his speed at climbing the slopes. But Attu knew, without ever having seen it, that the path wasn't any narrower than all the others. As for his agility, there were other men in the gang who ran just as fast as he did. The truth , and he would have bet his life on this, was that Devi had finally noticed him. And if Attu had his diary with him, he would have written black on white

what he really thought: she fancied him. It was as simple as that.

And that was why, when the day of revenge came, Attu couldn't stop looking at his watch, although they had only just moored the boats below Behmai. For Devi alone, he intended to prove himself; the most docile of men. He dreamed that each movement, because so explicit, would be a stunning demonstration of his loyalty. He was sure that she would notice and would be grateful to him. That they would be united in triumph. He didn't dare imagine what would happen after that. He only knew that something would happen, and that it would be wonderful. For Attu was equally convinced that no other man could adore her as much as he did.

It was true that Man Singh continued to follow her around like her shadow, but he criticized her from time to time. Since the date for the revenge had been decided upon, he accused her of neglecting him. Man Singh didn't understand either, Attu thought. He was ten years older than Devi, and had worn himself out from running in the ravines. At the end of the raid in Sultanpur, when extremely important affairs were being discussed at the back of the bazaar, he wasn't there. He was at the other end of the street, directing the siege away from the police station. Everything he knew about the raid had come from Devi. But he had hardly listened to her; he was so angry at having missed such a moment. As far as Attu was concerned, Sultanpur had been his moment of glory. Everything had been literally handed over to them. Right up to the incredible piece of luck at the very end—the fateful incident at the jeweller's.

It took place at the very end of the bazaar, just before Mustaqeen signalled withdrawal. Devi had been busy looting the shop opposite, which was full of transistors and kitchen utensils. Attu had chosen the jewellery shop. The shelves were empty and he thought that it had already been pillaged. But as he was leaving, a register, wide open on the counter, caught his eye. He automatically glanced at it and then he froze. The name of the Singh brothers was scrawled right in the centre of the page. It was followed by an address, a receipt, a stamp, an order, and finally a signature. He couldn't believe his eyes.

The twins had been here less than a week ago, to buy wedding bangles and to order a pair of earrings.

Attu, flabbergasted, had wanted to check that he had really read it properly. So he leaned over the ledger. Once more he saw the names of Sri Ram and Lalaram Singh. There was no doubt about it. There wasn't another twosome like them in the Valley. Only they would take such liberties and leave their names lying about in a shop. They must have really wanted these earrings, he thought to himself. Were they going slightly mad?

Attu moved towards the door once again, briefly wondering which one of the two brothers could possibly be getting married, and to whom. A rustling from underneath the counter, reached his ear.

He ducked, and took the risk of poking the butt of his old gun, under the display-case. Its metal struck a soft bulk. He immediately screamed, like they do in the movies: 'Get out of there!' A skinny midget with pinched features, unfolded before him. The man wasn't shaking, in fact, he didn't even seem to be surprised. He just looked suspicious. Attu reckoned that despite his slight frame and ridiculous height, he could turn very vicious any moment.

He pressed the butt of his gun against his temple. It wasn't difficult, as the man scarcely reached his waist. He pushed him as far as the door and shouted to Devi across the street that cut through the bazaar, 'I know where the twins are!' She was still stacking transistors into a bag. Instantly she stopped, not quite believing him. Her expression seemed to say, 'It's too good to be true.' But Attu insisted, 'Come on Devi, hurry up!' She must have thought that the two brothers were in the shop, because she took aim with her Mauser. Attu pushed the jeweller aside, and started screaming again. 'They came here last week! I have the shopkeeper! We must grill him...'

He straightened up, brandishing the ledger: 'I know how to read, do you understand, I know how to read!' But Devi didn't even glance in his direction. With one leap, she crossed the street, jumped on the jeweller, threw him onto the shop floor,

and gave him a blow in the stomach with the butt of her gun. He didn't have to be asked twice. As soon as he caught his breath, he answered all their questions.

He acknowledged that the Singh brothers had been there last week. He knew that they were well-known bandits, but they had paid for the bangles in cash, in large bills, and had ordered a pair of earrings. They had even paid a deposit. Attu interrupted him: 'Are you trying to fool me! Is all that is written in your ledger. What else is there! Which one is getting married?' He had started kicking him by now.

At that moment, a small, evil-smelling pool began to spread across the shop floor. Devi put her hand on Attu's: 'Stop, he is going to pass out.' Attu raised his arm and calmly continued, 'So which one is getting married? The small, thin one with a cruel expression on his face, or the well-built one?' 'Neither,' the jeweller stammered, the yellowish pool continuing to spread. 'It's their nephew, he lives with them in Konch.' 'In Konch. In Konch? What are you talking about? 'Attu muttered in low pitched tones. With his index finger the jeweller pointed to the ledger: 'If you know how to read, you can see it is written there...'

Attu leaned over the book once more, and saw that it actually was the address the two brothers had given. He suddenly felt extremely proud of himself. Devi now moved closer to the midget, and asked him in her smoothest voice, 'And when is the wedding going to take place?' The jeweller gulped before answering her. 'In three weeks.' 'But when exactly?' Devi repeated, and wrenched off the thick gold chain around his neck in one go. The jeweller answered immediately. 'I think ... I think it is on Shivaratri.'

Attu retraced his steps, trying to get the upper hand again. He caught sight of a big calendar hanging on the wall, decorated with photographs of actresses. He took it down and handing it to him, demanded : 'Show me on this.' The man lifted up the page for January, then seized the one for February. His finger stopped half-way down the page, on the fourteenth. 'Are you sure?' Attu asked. The other nodded in affirmation. 'Where is

the fiance from?' Devi persisted. 'From Moth,' the midget whispered. Devi turned towards Attu: 'Will you remember?' 'I'm sure I will!' he exclaimed, laughing loudly.

That was his most wonderful memory of the raid in Sultanpur. Devi and he had touched each other; her arm had rubbed against his and he felt a great warmth radiate. But then she had frowned abruptly, and said, pointing to the midget : 'That pig is going to speak, when the twins come to pick up their earrings!'

What happened next is rather vague in Attu's memory. On the jeweller's workbench, to the right of the counter, he saw a large chopping-board, almost like that of a butcher's. As though in a dream, he heard himself tell Devi: 'We'll see if he is going to talk!' Grabbing the midget's right hand, he flung it onto the counter, and with one chop, cut off his index finger. The monster didn't scream at all, he simply collapsed at their feet, blood spurting in all directions. Attu screeched: 'If you talk, the rest of you will get the same treatment!' He then leaped outside, his legs trembling. He hadn't had the heart to loot the shop. But Devi, jumping from behind him, threw him a watch. He thought it belonged to the midget. 'Idiot, take that at least!' she screamed. The watch had fallen into a mud-stream flowing through the bazaar. Attu bent down to pick it up. At that moment he lost his diary.

Or at least that was what he thought later on. But too late, for by the time he realised it, the gang was beginning to penetrate the ravines, with its the smell of earth, the taste of bitter, caustic dust. Suddenly, Attu had felt completely crushed, his pride and intoxication had evaporated into thin air. Overcome by a strong desire to tell the story of the raid in the bazaar, he had automatically felt his shirt pocket, where he usually kept his notebook, along with his cashew nuts and his eucalyptus cigarettes. Finding everything missing, a strange sensation gripped him, the same one as when he had cut off the midget's finger. He felt he was floating. He might have stopped to check at the bottom of his bag, but Devi, was walking right behind him in the file. He thought her dark eyes were scrutinizing the

nape of his neck. So for now he satisfied himself by praying to Ganesh. But that evening in the camp he had to face the reality: he really had lost his notebook.

After that, all the ensuing celebrations were ruined for him, even when he shouted at the top of his voice: 'Long live Devi! Long live Vikram!' as they were sharing out the loot. Nothing could soothe his fears, not even his enormous part of the booty. Even Devi's compliments were wasted on him. She had explained to the men that it was thanks to him, Attu, that she had discovered where the Singh brothers were. She even requested that he be given ten thousand rupees more, for his help, and added: ' You can buy yourself a beautiful new, machine-gun with it.' Out of the blue, her face wore a dreamy expression.
Mustaqeen was more solemn than ever. He had listened to Devi's story attentively and he already had a plan. Being familiar with the area of Behmai he knew that the region between the villages and the fields was furrowed with extremely narrow gorges, and that only one path linked Konch, the village where the twins lived, and Moth, the bride's place. This path crossed Behmai.

Mustaqeen thought aloud. The marriage procession would have to go through the Singh brothers' village. It was a fair bet that on this festival day, the brothers would return to their village to strut about in front of their house with the wedding presents, while awaiting the cortege. They would be easy to catch. They would arrive by boat, and reach Behmai by climbing the steep river path. As soon as they had surrounded the village, they would place this path under surveillance, in order to cut off any hide-outs. During the attack, some of the men would stay below, armed with walkie-talkies, to guard the riverbanks. Up above, the men would plunder the village, and be given the exceptional right to rape the women, in view of what had happened to Devi. He alone would be entitled to kill the two brothers. As soon as the procession arrived in the square, they would rob everything they could. The jewellery that had been bought by the brothers in Sultanpur, meant that they could count on a fat booty. Throughout the attack, Devi would be responsible for giving orders, as she was the one who had been insulted. In any case,

they would go over the operation several times, before actually carrying it out. When everything was over, they would share the loot here, in Shama, and the two bands would then split up. Each one would be free to do as he wished. As far as Mustaqeen was concerned, his men would be off duty that same evening until the end of the Holi.

Man Singh had one objection to all this. What time would the procession pass by? Mustaqeen smiled, and answered that he had already thought of that. The people of Konch, as far as he could remember, sold wheat in wholesale. They would send two men disguised as Thakurs to the village, two weeks before the wedding. They would pretend they wanted to buy grain, and would drive a hard bargain, haggle over the prices, return several times and so drag things out until the morning of the wedding. Each time they went they could acquire yet another piece of information. The time of the attack would be decided at the very last minute.

Man Singh still didn't appear to be convinced. ' Come now,' Mustaqeen grumbled, before turning back to his harmonium. 'I have perfectly capable men.' He then began to sing. He was beaming as were all the other men, so Man Singh gave in. But poor Attu.

He would really have liked to go to the bottom of the gorge, so that he would neither see nor hear what was going on. But he had no choice but to stay, and to join others in songs of rebellion, and ballads of death, to pray to Kali, Hanuman and Ganesh who had cleared their path of all obstacles.

That night, Attu was the only one who couldn't sleep. At one stage, as he couldn't stand it any longer, he took out his torch and his new notebook, and tried to write a few lines. He couldn't resist trying to recall the contents of the notebook he had lost in Sultanpur. Strangely enough, all he could recall was provisions and medicines.

The nights that followed were no better. Attu decided to make a clean breast of it to Man Singh. He had scarcely finished when he retorted : 'Why don't you keep your accounts in a new notebook.' With that, he returned to his game of cards.

Attu realised that not one of the bandits was the least interested in his writing, and it made him despondent for sometime. He even thought of running away. But just then an idea struck him. If no one in the gang had attached any importance to his diary, then the same was probably true for the police in Sultanpur, presuming it had fallen into their hands. Those cops must be the same as all the others in the Valley, country bumpkins who didn't speak a blessed word of English. In any case, it had most likely fallen into the ditch in front of the jeweller's, and ended up in the sewer.

Once more he decided to stay in the band, and from that moment on, all his thoughts were for his new gun. On receiving it, he had attached the silver plate with Kali's image on it, as custom dictated, and then began to dream of revenge, like everyone else.

As fourteenth February drew nearer, he felt increasingly confident. The very next day after the raid, they had spoken about Mustaqeen, Man Singh, and Devi on the radio. But not a word about his diary, any more than they had spoken about the jeweller whose index finger had been cut off. The newspapers he had borrowed from the villagers in Shama remained equally silent on the subject. Attu simply noticed that all the headlines mentioned Devi, and that Mustaqeen was almost ignored. They had even invented two nicknames for her: 'The Beautiful Thief' and the 'Dasyu Sundari.' He personally preferred the second. However, much to his dismay, none of them had even hinted that she could be a killer.

Two days before the raid, the spies that had been sent to Konch came back to Shama and confirmed the date of the wedding. Half a day later, another scout returned to announce that in Moth, the fiance's village, the shamiana for the wedding party had just been erected. The procession was to cross Behmai around midday. It also looked as if the brothers had returned to their village. When she heard this, Devi couldn't keep still. Whenever she got the chance, she would repeat to Mustaqeen: 'Come on, let's go over the plan once more.' It was rehearsed over and over again. And when they had finished, she always

ended on the same note: 'Everything must be done quickly.' Attu was aware of the fact that it was a set phrase; that she must have heard Vikram saying it, or maybe she had heard it in the movies. Had Devi ever really understood what a minute or a second even was, even if she had learnt to tell the time? Nevertheless, Attu was pleased that she wanted to be exact, to play at being a real leader. That is why he was so attached to his watch.

In the beginning he had hated it, convinced that because of it he lost his notebook. But hearing Devi repeat this sentence, he thought to himself that this would be his chance to shine. Three days before the attack, he told her that the watch counted the seconds. She must have remembered this. The day before the raid, just before they reached Behmai, as they were dividing up the various tasks in the cove where they had just hidden the boats bought from the Mallahs in Kalpi, she chose Attu to be the one to inform them of the omens. He would therefore be the first one to climb the steep slope leading to the village: 'Climb quickly, she ordered. Don't lose a second. You have a beautiful watch, and I am counting on you.' The men had begun to titter. And the following day, as they were leaving, they had laughed aloud to see him at the bow of the first boat, eyes glued to the face of his watch.

He ignored them. It was exactly half past eleven. As planned the small boats boldly slipped between the sand banks, avoiding the current, creating almost imperceptible waves as they made their way into the channel that led to the cove of Behmai. The cliffs already loomed ahead, red and rugged, streaked through, with the long, steep slope.

It was only twenty to twelve, time to jump out of the boats, look up, climb and run quickly, in order to begin the solitary fight with the earth. The sky was completely transparent, the path clear and deserted; the world was peaceful with no visible sign of anything. Behind Attu, the men jumped out of the boats in turn, and crouched in the shade of the cliffs. He consulted his watch once more. This time, no laughter followed him. Only the spirit of revenge reigned. The bandits prayed for a few moments in silence. Attu leaped from rock to rock amongst the scree. He

scorned the empty space; he felt like a gazelle, a bird, a dragonfly, a kid; felt like everything on earth that is alert and agile.

The slope became increasingly steep, and Attu was out of breath, but finally, the first thatched roofs and clay walls came into view behind some fallen stones that resembled an old rampart.

The sky was still limpid. Attu glanced at his watch again. It was ten to twelve, time to give the signal. Mustaqeen had decided that to be safe, they wouldn't speak, make any noise or use walkie-talkies. All he had to do was raise his arm.

He looked up at the cliff tops. The wind had begun to stir as it often did around midday. Something rustled behind a mountain pinnacle. It looked like a piece of cloth. Then all of a sudden to his left, Attu saw a scorched tree. There was a crow on the top of it. He had only just seen it, when the bird let out three loud cries, that sounded like laughter.

He still hadn't raised his arm. He could lower it if he wanted to. He decided to look at his watch. As soon as his eyes fell on the dial, Attu put the bad omen out of his mind. It was exactly ten minutes since he had left, to the second. He smiled to himself, exulted. Then he raised his arm. He was right on time.

## *87*

As for Devi, she had no means of knowing what time it was. In fact, she was still wearing Vikram's watch, the face of which was shattered, the hands forever stuck at the moment he was killed. How long was it now since Vikram had been shot by the Singh brothers? Someone had spoken about it yesterday, as they were rehearsing the plan for the last time. Probably Lukka, or more likely, Attu, whose head was always full of figures. He had said: 'Seven months today; exactly seven months.' Devi had been surprised. As far as she was concerned, Unnao and Behmai seemed like yesterday. Or many moons ago. In fact, she didn't know anymore. The Guru during her stay in the forest, had forced her to forget all that. 'In you,' he had said, 'time will no longer exist. There will only be the Spirit of Revenge, the

Eternity of Kali. As long as the blood of your enemies has not been shed, there will be no more feasts or happiness, neither months nor years will exist, there will be no future and no past. Even if your womb is barren, you are fertile Devi, you will give birth to justice and find your strength in the deep resentment that is tormenting you. And when that day comes, the song of revenge will strike up, like a great cry from hell.'

He had taught her how to nourish the spirit of death and revenge from within; to make it unfold from the base of her back where it nestled, the Kundalini, coil after coil, like the huge snake that it was. And once it reached her neck, how to transmit it all over her body, to every last fibre of her muscles, right through to her tensed nerves. A thousand times, maybe ten thousand times, the Guru and Devi had repeated the exercise. Now the time had come. There she was, alone before the village of her enemies.

The river was deserted, the cliffs bare. The entire world was a void, bereft of omens of any kind. Nothing mattered, apart from the power surging inside her. The water turtles that fled as soon as the small boats hit the currents didn't matter, any more than the jackal who screeched in the distance, on her left. Devi could see and hear it, but it seemed very, very far away. Inside her, as the Guru had predicted, there was only a relentless black coil blindly searching, beating a path.

She jumped onto the sands just after Áttu, the first to run and take shelter at the end of the cove while they waited for his starting signal. She noiselessly passed by the temple that had been built by the Singh brothers. The men followed her in silence. 'No prayers once we get down there, she had ordered before leaving. If you need to call on Kali, do so in your hearts alone.' In any case, the temple was dirty, the garlands had withered, the joss sticks long burnt out, before the image of Kali, the Earth's Mother. The big red and black dispenser was rusted; its levers blocked half-way.

The men huddled around Devi, against the clay of the cliffs. It was hot, almost midday. And almost time. Life was running its course; fate taking over, eternity seeking a path, just like Attu

on the cliff-side, hopping along the footpath with puppet-like, jerky steps. Devi smiled. The world had never been so peaceful, nor the waters so clear. The river that had brought her so much unhappiness would today bring her total oblivion. The Guru had also predicted this: 'Your magic, Devi, was born by the riverside. That is where it died, and that is where it will be reborn.

Devi prayed and the only one she could hear was the Guru, and him alone. As he spoke the Spirit approached, lightly touched her cheek, her mouth mingled with her breath: 'Forget your bullets, Devi; forget about your machine-gun. Think only about the arms of the soul. Become the devil without either morals or pity. Go tear your enemy from limb to limb; remember all they have torn from you; go suck their marrow, crunch into shards, their bones...'

She felt for Vikram's photo, now tattered, so it was difficult to see anything. For weeks she hadn't seen it. Man Singh said nothing about this. Against this particular death, he was helpless. He probably even knew that when Devi offered herself to him, that in reality she did so to Vikram. At this moment, at the height of her prayer, Vikram was still with her. She could see him once more, between the sun and the river, with his elongated face sharpened from the trials of life, and shadows that lent his eyelids a bluish tinge. He smiled. He was handsome, confident, and unafraid.

And neither was Devi, although the starting signal was about to be given. She struck the ground with her heel, impatiently. She was wearing new shoes, magnificent, zipped-up boots that had been stolen in Sultanpur. Then she pulled her police superintendent's cap tightly onto her head. She had had to abandon her jeans and her red head-band, as Mustaqeen found the scarf was too bright, and might prove a risk. When Devi had replied that it was the same scarf that brought her luck, Man Singh reminded her of what the radio had been drumming out since the raid in Sultanpur. The police from Delhi had arrived in the gorges with the most terrifying arms, flame-throwers to Kalashnikovs. So Devi gave in. But now that Attu had reappeared from behind the rocks, and the power of Kali was unfurling its

last coils inside her, she didn't give it another thought, but continued to repeat the verses that consume weakness, the ones the Guru had whispered to her as they were separating: 'On the day you take revenge, Devi, you will be beyond good or bad luck. You will be part of the revenge. You yourself will be revenge...'

Attu, a miniscule bistre dot gripping the cliff-top, had just given the signal. She sprang directly onto the path. The men followed close behind. The heat seemed to intensify all of a sudden; the trail was steep and strewn with thorns. Devi was getting out of breath. With each step her loudspeaker, tied to her belt, bounced off her hips. Half way up lay a Kali shrine.

She cannot remember having seen it the day the people of Behmai had forced her to climb this same path. How could she have? But today was the monsoon deluge of death and Devi was going to drink the blood of her enemies. She felt as strong as the Goddess Kali herself in the niche of the oratory, with her poisonous fangs and hanging tongue.

She folded her hands before her eyes, then drank down a measure of alcohol from her flask. It burned her gums, her throat, right down to her chest. She started to run again, bounding down the path. The sun had darkened as it had on the sands at Unnao. But this morning it was joyous and did not try to seize her; on the contrary it followed her.

One more leap, one more plea to the Goddess Kali. At the base of her neck, slowly, flexibly, the last coil unfolded. A side-street, three small courtyards, and there was the square. The accursed square; the square with the well, on a slope; the square where the wind of Yama, death was about to blow in just a moment.

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The first thing she saw when she jumped onto the rim of the well were the women who ran to lock themselves into their houses; as if they had been waiting for her all this time. As for the men, they couldn't believe their eyes. They remained rooted to the spot, not moving an inch.

At the foot of the well two brass pots lay upturned, the same ones the brothers had made her carry. The dust was soaking up the water. Devi raised her head, scanned the square. The shack was no longer there. Near the wall where it had been, there were simply long, dark streaks, traces of fire.

Everything else about the square was the same. How long did that moment actually last? It was impossible to say, for it was one of those moments during which everything stopped.

She brandished her loudspeaker and her machine-gun. Then she screamed. She was exactly what she had promised herself she would be: Devi, the one who took revenge.

The gang spread out. There was no longer a living soul on the square except for the invalid, lying on his bed in the shelter of the awning.

Then the screams, the orders and threats, the general hubbub that took place during an attack. The invalid was shaken and beaten, the note with details about the revenge pinned onto his back. Attu, who had made it yesterday, now looked after this part. He was everywhere at once; that boy, there was no stopping him. But he might end up doing something stupid. She could push him aside, tell him to calm down. But the looting was about to begin and the Guru had said: 'Don't waste your time on useless words, Devi, just think about your enemies.' She heard herself shouting:

'Find me the two brothers!'

Behind the clay walls some children whimpered, locks were smashed. Chests were being overturned, fabric being ripped up. Weeping and wailing, the weak cries of the women. Devi turned away, not wanting to hear them, and repeated once more the words of the Guru: 'Make what is black, blacker still. Become a stone. Smile when all around you the drooling froth of misery flows.'

Although, she repeatedly muttered the sacred chant, she still could not manage to smile. She wanted the brothers then, just then. Shakti coursed through her, in her feet that were ready to leap, in her teeth that were biting her lips, in her eyes that inspected the rooftops, in her finger squeezing the trigger. 'Make

what is black, blacker still. Add more suffering to your present suffering. May the earth burn as if it were the night at the end of the world. May she cover herself with a bloody mud. May the waves of pain cease.' At that moment, Devi had a hundred stomachs, a hundred heads, a hundred red and black tongues with thirsty papilla, and the force of thousands of arms. She could be as big or as small as she chose to be. She was the invulnerable, the inaccessible, the most violent of all the violent; she had to experience that unique taste, the salt of revenge that is only found in blood.

The looting was finished, the procession had still not arrived; the two brothers had not appeared; something had gone haywire. The light in the square became increasingly pallid; the force reaching her blood became increasingly violent. Devi heard her own voice screaming words through the loudspeaker which she didn't doesn't quite understand.

'Where are the twins? Bring me those dogs!'

No one moved. On the plaque riveted to Devi's gun, Kali's silver face grimaced. She too awaited her revenge.

No longer did she know who was speaking within her. It was no longer the Guru or Kali, simply a pure force, vindictiveness, undiluted hatred. The men obeyed her immediately. She was now cold, as cold as the steel of their guns. She perceived everything, right down to the miniscule scar on the invalid's chin, beside the well. And the terrified lizard that remained petrified, in the middle of a wall.

One by one, she scrutinized the men's faces as they were chased out of the houses and pushed into the circle. Not a sign of the twins. Man Singh was getting worried and moved closer to her, whispered a few words in her ear. She agreed; to torture them. In fact, she prepared to take care of it herself. She jumped off the well. She hit, spat and insulted. The cliffs echoed her insults. A red river swirled in the back of her head, became a sea, burnt and dried her up.

Nothing relieved her anger. She was capable of doing anything at this moment in time; she could slash stomachs, plunge her hands into the guts and wrap them around her neck

as if they were garlands, even dance. There they were at last, the men of Behmai at her mercy, those who dishonoured her. How many men had there been in the shack and how many times? She had counted them; she is sure of that, but once more the Guru had unburdened her memory. 'Forget the number,' he had said,' Forget about it Devi; think only of blood.' And she had obeyed him blindly.

A red ocean beat against her temples. Her own men were terrified; they no longer dared to move. What was she going to do? The serpent of death began his dance. Now nothing could stop him.

Devi lifted up her machine-gun; she was going to shoot. Into the air maybe, or onto the ground, she didn't even know herself. For the moment she wanted to watch the fear on her enemies faces. She moved from one to the other, but didn't recognize any of them. How weak they were these Behmai men, just poor sacks of flesh. And these were the ones who stripped her? The ones who humiliated her, and had treated her like dirt? These very ones who were now begging her, and calling her Madame?... She wanted to shoot them. But at the last minute she decided not to. 'Only the blood of the brothers will wash away your shame,' the Guru said. 'Only that blood will wash away Vikram's blood. Kill only your enemies.'

But they were still not there. Even though she had beaten and threatened them, all the villagers had whimpered the same refrain: 'They aren't here Madame. We don't know any more than you do. They were supposed to come. Something must have happened to them on the road, or down in the bride's house in Konch..'

Devi bowed her head. They must be telling the truth. Man Singh had called the men who were on guard duty on the three roads that led to Behmai by walkie-talkie just a while ago. 'Nothing on the horizon,' they had all answered. Neither the procession, nor the Singh brothers, or even the police. Nobody.

And yet, it was definitely the day of the wedding, In fact, the women who stood before her were decked in festive sarees; now the dazzling sarees overflowed from the bags of loot,

together with their heavy jewellery. The men of Behmai were spruced up too; their hair well-groomed, freshly shaven.

Devi moved into the centre of the circle again. From the depths of her memory, a brief movement exploded. That crafty eye, that stature, those well-built shoulders, that mass of muscles. The name of the man came to her like a thunderbolt. Surendra, Surendra Singh, the man who had bitten her breasts and spit into her mouth. The man who had taken so much pleasure in her pain.

This time, Devi pulled the trigger. Blood, at last. He begged her. But it had to continue. She shot again. Devi was overjoyed. She was floating on the red ocean, whose waves were unrolling, coming closer. The stronger they were the happier she felt; she let herself go, elated. Another memory emerged from the reddish tide, images from a film. Was it in Gwalior with Vikram after her operation? No, it's a song, a tune she had heard a thousand times on her transistor: 'Will I kill you, or will I let you live... '

But things were happening too quickly; the man only had a few seconds to live. Devi shot one last time. That was it. Where were the brothers? That death had yielded no salt.

She turned around. The light was now yellow, a pale veil blocking the face of the sun. Man Singh's walkie-talkie crackled. Still no procession on the road leading from Konch. The river was depleted, the northern road was completely still. Lukka suddenly looked weak and Mustaqeen foolishly fiddled with his moustache. All the men's energy appeared to be sapped, those who were armed as much as those who were under fire. She was the only one who held her head high.

She had give orders quickly.

'Gather up the loot. Bring the prisoners down to the river.'

It was the first sentence that came into her head. It could only be the voice of Kali.

The men were more than happy to hear an order at last. They hurtled down the path to the river, pushing the prisoners ahead of them.

Attu was at the head of the file; Devi was the last one to leave. She was still looking at the square, sighing. Once on the path,

she choked, and stopped. Half-way, in front of the Kali shrine she wondered if she had left any men up there. If she hadn't remembered this detail, Man Singh must have, because the walkie-talkies in front of her continue to crackle. To the north as well as to the east, as on this steep slope, there was no one in sight.

Everyone arrived on the sands. The prisoners were lined up against a thorny bush in the middle.

Devi was the last one to come. At the nape of her neck, the snake slowly curled back. The back of her mind, was no longer occupied by a red stream. She thought about the dead Surendra. Although he was an enemy, his death was tasteless. All of a sudden, she felt weary. She leant against a corner of the cliff, and closed her eyes.

There was shooting. Was it near or far away? There was no real point in asking. But something shattered, exploded, shattered again. And it was close. Very close. Who was it?

Devi opened her eyes again. It was Attu. But what was he doing? He was trying out his new machine-gun. But why on the prisoners?

Who gave the order? Mustaqeen, Man Singh? But no, they stood there, open-mouthed, watching him. It wasn't Lukka, either. No, he too was there, like the others, looking on idiotically as the Behmai men collapsed onto one another.

Devi moved closer, her machine-gun at her hips. Lukka, Mustaqeen, Man Singh and a few others felt obliged to imitate Attu. They shot three or four times. Some more prisoners flopped to the ground. Then Lukka lowered his gun, as did Mustaqeen, Man Singh and the others. They turned their heads away. They had only one desire: to leave.

As for Attu, he saw nothing. He continued to shoot and the prisoners continued to collapse. Sometimes the machine-gun hesitated, stopped, shuddered then started up again. Kali's music had lost its rhythm, as indeed her dance had; her arms were disjointed; the world had gone crazy, the Kalyug.

Devi was cold. The red river had dried up, the Kundalini shakti had fled. However, she must continue to fight, because

here was Attu coming towards her, standing right in front of her, erect, with feverish eyes, legs apart like a movie hero, saying to her in his exaggerated, deep voice:

'Devi, there is your revenge!'

She stared at Attu, then at the pile of corpses. Everything tasted bland in her mouth, as it had been up in the village. Nothing tasted of salt. Devi lifted up her machine-gun and shot, straight at Attu's head, which exploded. But he wasn't aware of anything.

One more dead. And still no taste of salt in her mouth. Or maybe just a little. Something briny that gave her a little boost. She heard herself screaming at her men, just before she vomited:

'Throw him in with the others!'

## *89*

When he heard about the massacre in Behmai, the Inspector-General's first reaction was one of intense frustration. A half an hour earlier, he had received a document that he considered to be of the greatest importance, a spiral notebook with a filthy cover, spattered with mud. Despite the absolute disgust with which he leafed through it, Mahendra knew what it was. He didn't have to read the accompanying note. It was the account book of Phoolan Devi's gang, the most wanted woman in the State of Uttar Pradesh since first February, the day he had offered a reward of fifty thousand rupees for her capture.

It was all quite unlike the Inspector-General. But he had taken this decision without much thought, following a particularly stormy tiff with his wife who was not at all happy that he had cancelled their monthly reception at the end of the month. He had been unwavering. She fumed that it was a strange, indeed, to see her husband dictating the law, though he only came home three nights a week.

He was aware that since Putli Bai, this was the first time such measures had been taken against a woman. The figure that he had come up with happened to be the first one that came into

his head. He could no longer remember what price had been put on the head of the first Ravine Princess. Whatever it had been, he, would now have to take into consideration the growth of peoples purchasing power and thirty years of inflation. In any case, Mahendra stuck to this incidental figure. A few minutes later when he picked up his telephone to communicate his orders to Jain, he came to the conclusion that his estimation had been extremely reasonable, given the violent actions this cursed girl was responsible for, and even worse, the confusion she had managed to cause in his marriage. And that didn't include the strange fever that had troubled him at night for over a year now.

So with his usual haughtiness the Inspector-General dictated his wishes. All the same, his voice faltered when he declared : 'Dead or alive.' It was quite obvious that he wanted her alive. Jain took advantage of the moment to ask Mahendra the most unbearable of all questions: 'What description should be put on the poster declaring the ransom?' 'Find a solution', was the Inspector-General's cold and curt response.

Jain found a way out of this mess with dexterity and brilliance; in such a way that he didn't have to suffer even the slightest reproach: 'Young woman, about twenty years old, average height, short hair, often wearing blue jeans and a red head-band; usually in tennis shoes. Armed with a Mauser 303.' It was highly unlikely that the Bandit Queen would ever risk being seen in this get-up in any of the places where the poster would be displayed: police stations, octrois, banks, airports, train stations. Unless, of course, she decided to attack them. Nevertheless, Mahendra gave Jain's text his approval. Just as he countersigned the first draft of the poster, the sticky little notebook wound up on his desk. It contained the accounts and told about tiniest details and movements of the Bandit Queen.

Mahendra hunched over and screwed up his eyes, as he always did when he was intrigued by what he was reading. Within a few minutes he was absorbed in the whole thing. In approximately one hundred and twenty pages, the material and sentimental diary journal of the life of a gang was all there, dated, numbered and defined. Such an exceptional work had never

come into possession before. By simply glancing over a few pages, something else had struck him. Many of the digressions with which this stranger had peppered his accounts, concerned, either by pure chance or the most incredible luck, the Bandit Queen herself.

The author's name was nowhere mentioned, not even on the cover of the notebook. This bizarre author must have received some education though; his English was accurate, although rather simplistic in its formulations and syntax. 'He would have made an excellent policeman' he found himself muttering, after quickly leafing through it. With no further ado, he ordered his secretary not to disturb him unless it was extremely urgent.

He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. As it was Friday, it wouldn't be long before the offices emptied out. He could work undisturbed, on this mine of information. He would have the entire weekend to ponder over these new discoveries and then take the necessary measures.

Yet according to the strict rules that controlled his life with Mrs. Mahendra for more than five months now, he was obliged to go home that evening. Not to do so would be a blatant violation of their sacrosanct agreement. And as she already held the cancelling of their monthly reception against him, it was unlikely that this time he would be forgiven.

Nonetheless, Mahendra decided to disregard all this. With the most elementary prudence or out of the purest cowardice he handed over this odious task to his secretary.

'Exactly,' she retorted strangely, as soon as he had asked her to do this over the intercom.

Mahendra immediately stiffened behind his desk. Usually Miss Sharma received his orders with total indifference, as indeed she was supposed to and without comment. And now, for no apparent reason, her voice quivered with angry inflections he had never heard before.

'Exactly what?' the Inspector-General continued after a few seconds of confusion, a lump in his throat at the thought that his wife might be on the line, or even worse, in the adjoining-room, taking over his armchair.

But the quivering over the phone continued enthusiastically:

'Well ... exactly!'

Before long he heard Miss Sharma speak again on the loudspeaker, panting in the same fervent tones:

'That's it exactly; there is something important. A massacre: twenty-three dead. Its her...'

But the greatest infringement of all the rules concerning reserve, given the seriousness of the situation was about to be committed. Miss Sharma continued speaking with what appeared to be sincere compassion:

'I'll warn Mrs. Mahendra straightaway. I'm sure she will understand.'

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In the moments that followed, a strange Brownian movement coursed through the Inspector-General. Effervescence was rampant, provoked by almost imperceptible signs. The sudden crackling of certain telephones, unusual whispering around Mahendra's offices; rumours of an exceptional event, began to permeate the stairs and the corridors. Handymen, switchboard operators, secretaries, clerks, tea boys, young report analysts or civil servants like Jain, gone grey in the saddle, all understood that extraordinarily serious events had just taken place. It was difficult to know what the various ranks of this venerable police institution found the most surprising in the whole business; the savagery of the Bandit Queen—every minute brought new telegrams and radio messages confirming the massacre, always with new details which served only to add to its horror—or the bewilderment of the Inspector-General, who, for the first time, found himself faced with a real disaster.

The announcement had really shaken him. Only a few minutes later he recovered his spirits. But only partly, because then he did something strange. He took his keys out of his pocket and locked himself into his office.

For at least a quarter of an hour, no noise filtered from the room. As silence weighed behind his door, rumours buzzed through the corridors and the staircases, like the agitated flies about to attack. But as soon as this dull hubbub reached Mahendra's ears, he finally woke up. He unlocked his door, passed wordlessly in front of Miss Sharma, and for the second time on this day, did something out of the ordinary: he walked straight down to the bottom of the corridor, to the cubbyhole that served as Jain's office. In a tone he hoped was intimidating he uttered: 'Do you know now where Behmai is?' Until then, no one had ever heard Mahendra speak like this. In fact, it was a tone that didn't suit him at all; there was an almost feminine stridency in his voice which just missed being ridiculous.

In fact, Jain wasn't in the least bit frightened. When Mahendra pushed open his door; he had been on the line with a civil servant from the Sikandara police station. According to Miss Sharma, who played the heroine to the hilt during the quarter hour's respite the Inspector-General had involuntarily given them, the alert had come from this distant market town.

Unrestrainedly, he tried to smother the twanging of his caller by putting his hand over the earpiece, but finally he decided to face the music, and humbly handed over the telephone to Mahendra. This gesture of loyalty appeared to have a calming influence on him. In an excess of humility, he also felt obliged to give up his armchair. But this time his offer was turned down. Once again he had assumed the airs of the great Mahendra, and spoke haughtily to the officer from Sikandara; he listened, and took notes. From time to time he; looked up to coldly glance at the sea of untidy files weighing down Jain's desk. The only outward sign of tension was his palm clenched before the page on which he was taking down notes, as though he wanted to prevent Jain from making them out.

A few minutes later, when Mahendra hung up and asked him to follow him into his office, Jain was convinced that his end was near. For the first time in years, a third person had been

invited to what was beginning to look like a war council. It was the young and dynamic K.N. Verma, Deputy Inspector-General (DIG) who had never disguised from the Inspector-General his animosity towards Jain, nor his ambition to succeed him.



With the sudden promotion of Deputy Inspector-General (DIG) Verma, Mahendra believed he had found a way of erasing his deplorable moment of weakness from his subordinate's mind. To tell the truth, the expression on Jain's face, when he saw his rival enter the room, already relieved him of some of his despondency. He thought that he could now organise, in his own way, a suitable explanation for the massacre of Behmai.

He began by unfolding a map of the region onto his desk, and to analyse it in accordance with the information he had just received from Sikandara. The official had said there were four hundred inhabitants, about sixty clay houses entirely obscured from the river, linked to other villages by roads which were practically inaccessible. There was no telephone before Moth, three kilometers west, exactly half-way to Sikandara.

Mahendra circled the approximate spot of the massacre, in pencil, in the middle of the contour line.

Mahendra traced a second circle on the map indicating, Konch, from where the wedding procession was expected. Balmukand, a cowherd had brought them the news. He had been at the top of the ravines when the attack took place, and he had seen the gang climbing the cliffs. The girl was at the head of the file. Discreetly, he had slipped around to the back of the village, found himself a bicycle, and pedalled as quickly as he could to the village of Moth. The telephone was not working. So he had continued on to Sikandara, and had gone directly to the police station, there.

Mahendra carried on tracing the supposed routes on his 'chief of staff' map. Jain, now saw an opportunity to redeem himself:

'Something is not quite right in all this,' he ventured,

pointing timidly in the direction of the map. 'The attack took place at midday and the police weren't contacted until three in the afternoon. That means that this cyclist took three hours to do six kilometers...'

'How sharp your reasoning is, Jain,' was the immediate retort.

His irony had made him tight-lipped; The Inspector-General was now mulling over some vicious remark with which to squelch Jain for at least the next ten minutes. But for the second time that day, things didn't quite turn out that way. The telephone began to ring. For half an hour it rang repeatedly rang, in spite of strict orders to Miss Sharma to filter the calls. Each time Mahendra hung up and attempted to return to his map, it would ring again. He had no choice but to answer. The news had spread everywhere. And for once it was he, the Inspector-General, who had to give an account of events. Jain guessed who each caller was by simply listening to the explanations, terse as they may have been. It was, in quick succession, the judge in charge of organised crime within the Crime Belt, the Home Minister, several senior bureaucrats of the Central Government, and even some journalists, whom he had great difficulty in getting rid of.

When the ringing subsided, he eventually looked up. His features looked much the same as they always did, arrogant and calm, but it was quite obvious that he was no longer in the mood for jeering or even speculating about his 'chief of staff' map. He sent them back to their respective offices, with the order to round up as much of the personnel as possible to work during the weekend. Then he gave Jain the responsibility of summarising the information coming in from the police stations on the northern bank, where Behmai was situated. As for Verma, he entrusted him with the south bank, a second point in his favour. He was in charge of Kalpi, where, only two months earlier, he had set up the head office of the commandos from Delhi.

Verma came out of the office, assuming the superior airs of the Inspector-General. The man was stocky and short, and only

succeeded in looking perfectly arrogant. Jain held his gaze. Then he noticed something less of a caricature; a sharp, confident irony, bordering on slyness.

It was after six o' clock. Darkness and a bitter cold permeated the corridors. The most disagreeable evening that Jain had ever spent in these uncomfortable offices had just begun. And as often happens in such cases, he couldn't have imagined for a moment that this evening would be even more painful for the one who had been doing everything he could for years now, to torment him.

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Nonetheless, as the evening began, Mahendra had retained enough strength to keep up the appearance of tranquility. Both the silence and the. night delighted him. Now he could contemplate the amplitude of the catastrophe at his leisure. He took great pleasure in the notion that, having measured its dimensions he would find a way, like a Shakespearian king, to master the situation from this very office and probably come to a successful end.

He chose to anticipate the news. He called the station at Sikandara several times. The men hadn't yet returned from Behmai, but they had communicated by radio the first official number of victims: twenty dead, and five seriously injured. They had been loaded onto the lorries before being taken to hospital in Kanpur. Apparently, two of these survivors were capable of speaking.

They would be questioned the very next day, the Inspector-General decreed, as he gave Verma the task of preparing for the interrogation. The main objective was to find out what the girl looked like.

Then Mahendra called superintendent Yadav, who was in charge of the station in Kalpi. He ordered him to immediately send men to Sheikhpur Gura, the girl's village, in order to photograph each member of her family. Besides that, every

inhabitant there was to be interrogated. By constant cross-checking, they would surely find out what she looked like.

They would proceed as they normally did, Mahendra repeated to himself; they would dissect everything, patiently rebuild the puzzle, taking everything into account. His method was infallible. It was, after all, how he had managed to mow down Vikram Mallah, and he would get the girl in exactly the same way. She had signed her death warrant with this massacre, the most serious one in the Valley for twenty years. She would die as a result of her outrageousness. As far as he knew, it was the first time in the entire history of India that a member of the lower castes had risked killing so many men of noble birth. The first time too, that a woman had pleaded guilty to such an abomination.

Around half past ten, a small, unexpected incident further added to revive this confidence. Mrs. Mahendra called, having managed by some miracle to force her way through the filter of the switchboard operator. Her voice was smooth, as it was when she was about to go to the movies. She suggested sending him some kheer, cardamon rice cake, his favourite dessert. One of her domestics would bring it to him, in order to help him , she said, 'to get over these excessively tiring but at the same time thrilling moments.' She stressed the word 'thrilling.' He of course declined with good reason.

He unfolded his map in front of him. He would have preferred to plunge into the notebook, in which—and he was increasingly persuaded of this—, all the secrets of the girl were written. After a few more minutes, the temptation was too much for him. He simply couldn't continue working without granting himself this small pleasure; so he decided to read a few pages, at random.

He opened it, and straightaway came across the date, 15th January: 'She keeps eating cashew nuts,' the stranger complained; just above a grocery list and a very long bill. 'Today I couldn't find any when I went to get the supplies, and she lost her temper. I did my best, however, and bought her some fresh paans and two bottles of Campa Cola out of my own money. She could

have been nice about it. But as the day of revenge gets closer, she is more irritable. She is always on my heels.—I don't know what to do, for her to appreciate me. And when she isn't on my heels, she doesn't even notice me.'

Mahendra stopped abruptly. As he progressed from one sentence to the next, the matter he read became more unbearable. So did, in fact, the bandits have other interests apart from robbery and blood? Dreams and feelings? The author of these notes was quite obviously in love with the girl. They all were, damn it! What must she look like, what on earth...?

The Inspector-General suddenly felt disgusted and bundled the notebook into a drawer in his desk. He had to be methodical, deal with the problems as they arose, and not be waylaid by these revolting questions.

He grabbed a piece of paper and wrote a note to Verma; 'Find out the name of the gang's book-keeper. Get a description of him. Make out a poster with a reward for his capture: "Can read and write; Speaks English; Young." Once captured, interrogate him before anyone else. Should speak without much encouragement.' Then he took his 'chief of staff' map and slowly went over the lines he had traced a few hours earlier with a ball-point pen.

Suddenly, something else became quite plain. The circle around Behmai was situated almost opposite Sheikhpur Gura, the girl's village. How could he not have seen it before? The massacres that had just flared up again resulting in so many deaths, were in fact part of the history of the river. They were a continuation of the immemorial battle of the Sons of the Snake against the Children of the Sun; the combat of forest folk, who held the earth's secrets, against the northern invaders, the friends of fire and descendants of the stars.

He moved the tip of his finger along the road linking Behmai to Sikandara. Not even six kilometers. As Jain had quite rightly pointed out, the delay between the warning given by the peasant Balmukand and the arrival of the police on the scene of the massacre was inexplicable.

He wanted to ease his conscience, so he called the Sikandara

station. It was eleven at night, and the patrol sent to Behmai had finally returned.

At the other end of the line, superintendent Ramayan, head of the station, sounded worn out. His sentences were punctuated by lengthy sighs, or maybe it was panting; in any case something far too insistent to be actually spontaneous. Right from the outset, the man attempted to warn Mahendra that nothing good would come out of the situation in Behmai. He explained that before the patrol had arrived, the Singh brothers had been in the village, declaring that they would take revenge, and cause rivers of blood to flow in the Valley. Then they had disappeared into ravines. The police had shown up in Behmai a quarter of an hour later. On seeing their uniforms, the villagers thought that the girl had returned. Screaming, they had run to barricade themselves into a loft. The superintendent had picked up his loudspeaker to persuade them that no one wished them harm. But the screaming simply worsened. A woman who hadn't had the time to take shelter began going round and round in the centre of the square like a mad woman, before leaning over the well. Someone just about managed to save her before she jumped in. It took at least half an hour of negotiations with the villagers, to convince them that it really was the police they were dealing with.

Between two sighs, Ramayan assured Mahendra that he had left almost thirty men at the scene, and was in contact with them by radio. According to their last messages, they had tried to question the villagers about the massacre. But not one of them made any sense whatsoever, to the extent that the doctor who was accompanying the police party had just ordered valium, a sleeping tablet, to be distributed.

So that was what was holding up the questioning, Mahendra thought straightaway. However, he decided to keep cool and asked.

'At what time did you receive the alert this afternoon? At what precise time?'

There was complete silence at the other end, apart from the usual static. He repeated his question, and waited for at least

one more sigh from superintendent Ramayan. But only the crackling resumed, followed by a distant, unnatural voice repeating:

'The line has been cut, the line has been cut...'

A few seconds later, Mahendra heard the voice of the switchboard operator: 'They hung up, Mr. Inspector-General.'

A few seconds later, he stretched his hand out towards the telephone, but hesitated. After careful consideration, he picked up the phone once more.

It wasn't Sikandara he called, but Jain, to ask him to come to his office.

'Call the office driver,' he ordered, as soon as he appeared. 'We are going.'

He spoke in a sepulchral voice. Jain risked his last card.

'To Behmai?'

'To Behmai,' the Inspector-General repeated with a deep sigh, and for once he didn't seem annoyed that Jain had guessed.



'That night, Jain recalls, 'I don't know whether it was exhaustion or worry, but Mahendra seemed to be in a daze. I also noticed that his hands were trembling. It was very strange, but I wondered if I wasn't in the same state myself. Of course, in my case, it was the story Verma was going to cook up while we were beating our way through the undergrowth that was troubling me.

Around one o'clock in the morning, as if the gods were taking pleasure in stringing one calamity after another, superintendent Yadav from the Kalpi police station called the Inspector-General to tell him that he had come across the girl in the southern ravines and that she had escaped.

When the men spotted her, she had just led her band into a very narrow transverse valley. The police for their part, had advanced above the ridge, in the shadow of a chain of mountain peaks. All they had to do was to nab her at the exit of the narrow

pass. But as the police party began their descent, one of the policemen's guns went off involuntarily. The bandits opened fire and then disappeared. Night was falling. The men's torches scanned the cliffs, when the girl's voice rose out of the shadows. She was singing, as she had done in Behmai, the tune from a musical, adapting it as she went along, rather crudely as it happens: 'If you don't have a gun/ come over here, come , I will lend you my sari/ if you have no guts/ come over here, come , I will lend you my bangles...'

It was clear that Yadav was still stunned for he droned on and on: 'I don't know where she could have hidden; she is a devil, that girl... She was, what, twenty-five or thirty metres... We shot in every direction. It had no effect on her whatsoever; she continued to sing. And it rhymed, Mr. Inspector-General, it rhymed...'

'That's enough' Mahendra cut in.

He brought the conversation to an end and hung up. 'His face wore the opaque expression of someone who has just heard that a close relative has died.'

The car finally repaired, they left Kanpur around three in the morning after calling into their homes. Their wives had been exemplary. They had given them biscuits and flasks of tea, and their farewells had been as emotional as those normally reserved for soldiers going to war. There was only one hitch. Instead of the Shakespeare, that her husband had asked her to slip into his bag, Mrs. Mahendra had stuffed in the Complete Works of Lewis Carroll.

They found themselves on Highway 2, the same one which Vikram Mallah had attacked eight months earlier. They were only on it five minutes, when a lorry, honking loudly, suddenly emerged in front of the Ambassador, its headlights on fully The driver stepped on the brakes and pulled over into the ditch, risking either turning over or crashing into the lorry.

But Mahendra was not distracted from his book. When the Ambassador broke down for the second time, he just about deigned to raise his head.

'It was almost as if he had decided to turn a blind eye to

everything,' Jain remarked. 'He had only just put his book down when the driver managed to start up the engine. Then he let his head drop onto the back of his seat, and came out with one last thing which didn't surprise me in the least: "It's a very strange text, Alice in Wonderland. Do you remember the chapter about the Mad Hatter? Some poor guy is accused of a crime he didn't commit. The Queen accuses him of having killed Time..." It was as if he were talking to himself, his voice was slightly dull as though he had caught a cold. In fact, he coughed, before going on. "Basically, Lewis Carroll talks about the same thing as the Mahabharata : the world is governed by madmen."'

## *94*

The arrival of the Ambassador in the courtyard of the police station had created total pandemonium. From that moment on, only Mahendra existed. Although still sleepy, the superintendent Ramayan bent over backwards to greet him. Then he gave him the latest update. Nothing was really very new. His men's presence in Behmai had discouraged any further attacks. Apart from that, the distribution of valium had the desired effect and the villagers hadn't stirred.

Dawn had just broken. Mahendra didn't even have to tell them that he wanted to go up to Behmai right away. The superintendent had only just finished his report, when two wheezing jeeps drew up and stopped in the courtyard.

'I'm afraid we have nothing else to offer you,' Ramayan said by way of excuse, knowing Mahendra's passion for expeditions to the jungle.

The Inspector-General grimaced as if he had been asked to eat the food of a Harijan. He signalled Jain to follow him, to the back of the second vehicle. His expert eye recognized it as being the less ramshackle one . Without further ado, they set off. The two jeeps arrived on a track that became increasingly narrow; great flocks of peacocks fled as the vehicles approached. After a while, the path continually went up and down. Somehow or the other,

Mahendra managed to remain his stiff self but the suspension of the jeep was so poor that he constantly fell on top of Jain—that is when he wasn't being smothered by his subordinate's abundant, flabby flesh. With astounding composure he pushed away this adipose irritant. However, a quarter of an hour later as they reached Moth, he couldn't help slyly remarking to Ramayan who was sitting beside the driver:

'Maybe we would be better off continuing on foot.'

'It's dangerous,' the superintendent objected. 'Anyway, it wouldn't look very serious.'

Mahendra haughtily agreed. Then he consulted his watch and said:

'Do you think we are going faster by jeep than we could go by bicycle?'

Ramayan screwed up his eyes and looked around. After a while, he grumbled:

'You'll see when you get up there, they are all in a state of shock. They are speaking gibberish.

'Indeed, that is exactly what we are going to see,' Mahendra hissed, leading Jain to believe that he had found his punch again.

But it was only an illusion. Half an hour later, when the jeeps entered Behmai, Mahendra appeared to be deflated yet again, almost paralysed, as also everyone else. Even Ramayan's driver, who had spent part of the night in Behmai. To begin with there was the light, low and grey, falling onto the square; and the entirely bare, steep slope surrounded by a border of mud houses. It was impossible not to be drawn towards their rough, harsh walls; impossible for the eyes to escape, to look further than this dusty slope, further than the well which was higher up. With its two enormous columns there was something sinister about it. The eye was dragged back to the square, to its tenaille of blank facades, as though it were there, and nowhere else they must search for the reasons of whatever horrors had taken place.

More striking than anything else though, was the silence of that morning. Not a sound came from the houses and the courtyards. It was no longer like a village. All that could be heard was the rustling of leaves behind the yards when the wind rose.

Or, ironically enough, the cackling of parakeets in the branches. The other animals had deserted the square. The buffalos, cows, goats, hens and dogs had all fled this deathly smell. They had scattered among the sugar-cane fields below the village, together with the peacocks and the monkeys.

A third jeep sped into the square. It was Yadav, accompanied by Kamath, an officer from Delhi, who had been appointed three months earlier as head of the Anti-Dacoit operation. They had been given prior notice of Mahendra's arrival by radio, and had left Kalpi immediately. The put-putting of their engines had brought the villagers out of their houses. Most of them had already shaved their heads, and they all wore white.

Mahendra finally decided to get up and jump off the back of the jeep. The others followed suit, forming a small, timid group behind him. Never had the Inspector-General appeared quite so majestic. He slowly moved forward, his back stiff with solemnity, rather like a king in a drama. This so impressed the people of Behmai that as soon as he reached the square, they all rushed to kiss his feet.

Mahendra signalled them to rise one by one, lightly touched their hands and arms, muttering stock phrases, vaguely asking a few questions. A woman, Shakuntala, who was very beautiful, sobbed, asking for revenge for her husband and son both killed by shots fired by the girl.

'Don't pay any attention to her,' Ramayan intervened, pushing away the woman.

A woman who appeared to be more exhausted than the others still hung around Mahendra, but when she saw the rebuff suffered by her neighbour, she didn't dare come any closer. She went and sat on the edge of the well, her two young children nestling between her legs. 'Surendra Singh's widow,' the superintendent obligingly whispered into the Inspector-General's ear. 'He is the first villager the girl killed. It would appear she held more against him than any of the others.'

Mahendra sighed. Silence weighed down the square once more. As it was absolutely necessary to break it, Mahendra leaned towards Ramayan and asked:

'Where are the corpses?'

'Over here,' the superintendent said in a low voice, indicating an awning at the end of an alleyway.

Mahendra set off down the side-street, followed by Jain, Ramayan and the two policemen who had just arrived from Kalpi. They stopped in their tracks as soon as they saw the bodies simply covered with large peepal branches, flies buzzing around them. The people of Behmai had nothing to make shrouds with. Although, they had been carefully lined up, the bodies were poorly disguised under these fragile leafy screens, and looked more like one gigantic wound than anything else.

'Animals,' Mahendra whispered. 'Only animals could have...'

He couldn't finish his sentence. A gust of wind swept through the alleyway, carrying back an unbearable smell. Behind him, the head of the Anti-Dacoit Operation began to throw up.

'Let's go,' he muttered, 'turning on his heel.'

The next moment he was back in the square. As soon he came out of the alleyway, a policeman ran towards him and handed him a crumpled piece of paper:

'One of the bandits pinned it to his back,' he said, pointing to the invalid lying underneath an awning.

Mahendra looked the man over, then grabbed the sheet of paper. He immediately recognized it as the writing of the author of the diary. The contents explicitly linked the attack to the murder of Vikram Mallah at the hands of the Singh brothers. There were also various direct threats to the police. Its signature, 'Devi, the Dasyu Sundari was stamped with a wax seal, with an image of the Cobra King on it.'

Mahendra read the note a few times, then handed it over to Jain.

'At least everything is quite clear,' Jain remarked, as soon as he heard the message. 'We are sure that it is her, and now we have proof. All we have to do is capture her.'

Mahendra didn't answer. He looked at his watch again, seemed thoughtful, then turned towards Ramayan:

'Where is the peasant who raised the alarm?'

'He didn't want to sleep here,' the superintendent stuttered.

'So where did he sleep?'

'In Sikandara.'

'Under your protection?'

Ramayan mumbled something. But Mahendra took off and asked him another question:

'In your opinion, who, at this very moment, is besieging the police station that you command?'

As he got no reply, he went on:

'The journalists, Ramayan. The journalists who are going to find out before I do, why you only arrived in this square three hours later, despite the fact the alert was given at half past twelve.'

## *95*

The interrogation of the peasant Balmukand only served to confirm Mahendra's suspicions. Picked up from the temple where he had spent the night, he was then questioned by the Inspector-General who then passed him on to superintendent Ramayan. And then the truth came out.

It was as ridiculously stupid as Mahendra had feared all along. Balmukand actually had raised the alarm at half past twelve, after having hurtled down the road from Behmai on the bicycle. But the police of Sikandara hadn't wanted to listen to him, because they had just started a volley-ball game. 'Piss off!' the captain of the first team had shouted. 'There are raids every other day!' Another policeman had added: 'Your little friends Tool Box and the Boss are in the area. You aren't trying to tell us that they are the ones who are stealing your grain from you. Unless they have come for you wife?' Instead of bringing this incriminating witness into the lock-up, Ramayan had allowed him to spend the night in Sikandara. The journalists who had arrived in the square just after him, as he expected, hadn't been long in finding him out. Balmukand had just told them his story.

Mahendra locked himself into Ramayan's office and immediately called the Home Minister in order to give him his version of the massacre. He hoped, in passing, to slip

Balmukand's testimony into the conversation. He would say that he was a mental case, and that the massacre had driven him to complete distraction.

It took him half an hour to get in touch with the Minister, only to hear that he was away and wouldn't be available before evening. He now sent out a radio message to all the heads of police stations within a ten mile radius, to join up for a meeting.

They arrived posthaste, by midday. They had just received a letter from the girl which had been posted two days before the attack. The contents were identical, copied by hand and written in the same simple English. Mahendra recognized yet again the author of the diary: 'Don't look for me, or else you will have to assume the consequences,' the missive ended naively. The signature resembled the one on the paper pinned to the invalid's back in Behmai, sealed exactly as before, with a seal bearing the image of a Cobra King.

A maximum alert in every area of the ravines was now declared. It was to be even more stringent around Kalpi, where the men would patrol the gorges day and night. 'We won't let up, he declared in the same dull voice he had used the night before. This is an all-out war.' He then explained his plan of attack. All the helicopters that had been sent from Delhi would be flown over the ravines, with the mission to clean them out one by one. Two motor boats would go up the Valley and return, three times a day. Every village, within a radius of fifteen miles, would be strictly checked, the octrois' guard strengthened, the markets watched. The ransom would be doubled, and posters for her capture plastered all over the village walls within forty-eight hours. An autopsy was ordered on all the bodies. He gave Ramayan half a day to transfer them to Kanpur. Mahendra concluded this impressive series of measures by ordering all present to communicate regularly with him. They would make reports every morning and evening.

Twelve hours later, they still hadn't reached their offices in Kanpur, thanks to a traffic jam and a breakdown.

Mahendra and Jain set off on foot to the nearest police station ten kilometers away. For an entire four hours, Mahendra tried

in vain to reach the Home Minister. It proved just as impossible to reach the office. He had no difficulty getting through, but those he wanted to speak to were always absent. In total desperation, he called the biggest newspaper in Kanpur around midnight, and dictated a communique to it. He gave an extremely clever version of the facts, which managed to cover up any negligence on the part of the police in Sikandara. But the impassioned conclusion of this message surprised Jain greatly: 'Not a stone or a bush will be left unturned by our patrol. A few days from now, the Dasyu Sundari will be on her knees, and her empire of terror, a kingdom of ashes.'

On reaching back, Mahendra rushed straight into his office, to deal with the messages waiting for him. The first one was from the previous day with Verma's signature, saying that one of the injured, a certain Prayag, had talked. He had collapsed at the first round of gun-fire, and had only suffered leg injuries. He had pretended to be dead and claimed he knew everything that took place during the slaughter. Interestingly enough, he assured them that it wasn't the girl who had shot the prisoners but one of her men. According to Prayag, at the end of the massacre the man had turned to her and shouted: 'There is your revenge' or something like that.

His statement was stapled to the message. Under this document lay another report from Verma, indicating that the alarm had been raised at half-past twelve at the Sikandara police station, but the police had refused to intervene, using the excuse that were constantly being disturbed by false alerts. 'In fact, it would appear that the officers at the station in Sikandara then began a game of volley-ball,' stated Verma, ironically.

The source of the information was not clear, any more than the time it had been received. However, Mahendra wasn't too worried by this. He grabbed a sheet of paper, and wrote a rough draft of the same short answer he had wanted to transfer to the Home Minister the previous day: 'As far as I know, those playing volley-ball were a contingent of guards. The other men were out patrolling.' He then lifted up the receiver to call the Minister.

Just then he spotted an official envelope in his name, placed

conspicuously to the right of the telephone. He snatched it up, and opened it while still on the line to the Minister. As usual, they asked him to hold on. So he started to read the letter.

The first few lines obliged him to hang up. In a flowery, convoluted style, common in Indian administration since the Moghul Empire, they informed him that he had just been appointed Director General of the police. It was the highest position in this hierarchy. And the most honourable. Until he retired, Mahendra would have absolutely no more responsibilities, apart from presiding over receptions, cocktails, cricket tournaments, tennis and Rotary conferences. He would give speeches, and bestow medals and cups. In other words, he was being encouraged to resign.

'Mrs. Mahendra will be delighted' he thought, imagining all the receptions during which she would have the opportunity to jangle her bangles and show off her silks. He stuffed his appointment letter into the bottom of one of his pockets. Then he began tidying the papers that were scattered around the telephone.

The Inspector-General now committed the first really reprehensible act of his entire career as an officer. He grabbed the small notebook and pushed it into his bag, besides the Complete Works of Lewis Carroll. Then, considering that he would be stupid to stop there just as everything was going so well, he also snatched the wounded Prayag's statement.



Although he was very young, it was K.N. Verma who took over from Mahendra. In order to cover up all the advantages he had taken during the absence of his superior, and the clever scheming he had done with the Minister to oust him from his job, he demanded that Jain retain his position as Deputy Inspector-General. His request was granted. The first decision he took was to implement the plan of attack that had been set up by Mahendra.

As a result, the face of the girl , as he also called her, was

hung in every public place in the region. Verma, in an amazing feat, succeeded in matching it with another photograph, that of Ramkali, the youngest of Devi's sisters. According to the people of Sheikhpur Gura, she was the spitting image of her older sibling. Otherwise, Verma based his investigations on the statements given by the inhabitants of Behmai. They unanimously affirmed that the presumed murderess bore a striking resemblance to the beautiful Rekha, Was it Devi's legend that preceded the circulation of this facsimile or, on the contrary, was it the poster that spread the myth of a female criminal with savage charms, hungry for sex, as well as blood? What is certain is, that the special patrols, the commandos, the motor-boats and the helicopters had only just been put on alert, when all the newspapers, the length and breadth of India, picked up on the nickname she had given herself: Dasyu Sundari.

They also rekindled the memory of Putli Bai. But it was only a formality: her adventures now seemed pale in comparison to the orgies that Devi participated in. In Delhi and Calcutta, they were already repeating the phrase that had been on everyone's lips in the Valley a year earlier when Devi had simply been a small, local delinquent. 'A girl who bumps off men must be a good lay.'

This idea fired the public imagination to such an extent that one of the sub-continent's most reputable newspaper, the Indian Express, learnt that a famous writer, was going to leave his residence in Delhi and venture, at the age of seventy, into the quagmires of Sheikhpur Gura.

What he published on his return soon became the official version of events. All the journalists reproduced it, even those who had wanted to go into more depth and had been to Sheikhpur Gura. And as the villagers were inundated with visits, flash-bulbs, questions, sometimes even presents—a packet of biscuits, sweets or a load of transistors if they went into more detail—and believed that for the first time in their lives they were worth something, they blindly met all the requirements of their visitors. Yes, Devi was

beautiful, breathtakingly so. Yes, she was in love with love, and even lust. In fact, apart from killing, that was all she had ever been interested in.

They found Kailash on the other side of the river in Tyoga, now a father of four children. He didn't hesitate giving a detailed and sometimes bawdy account of his frolics with the Bandit Queen. And other witnesses added to the story. A young boy who had been kidnapped by her gang three months earlier and released a week later, told of how she used to strip each evening before her prisoners, and then choose one for the night. Then she killed him at dawn. The boy was unable to explain how he had miraculously escaped this lethal treatment.

So as soon as this demonic scenario was printed, the hacks scouring the villages of the ravines, were overwhelmed by the most fantastic trivia. A man who had lost half his leg in the Pakistan war but still, however, roamed the gorges by motorbike, claimed that one night as he was driving along Route No 22 the Bandit Queen had stopped him. On seeing his stump, she let him go at once, and rewarded him with some of her loot. The man confirmed that her beauty was so bewitching that he had entirely forgotten about his infirmity. The journalists vied with each other for the most sensational headlines. Everything was permitted, so long as it had the whiff of a western. THE REVENGE OF A WOMAN IN LOVE—THE FEMALE BANDIT'S REVENGE—A WOMAN-CHASE IN THE CRIME BELT. New nicknames for Devi multiplied. THE BOATWOMAN OF THE RIVER OF REVENGE, one of them called her, without any shame whatsoever; THE MISTRESS OF MURDER, THE LADY OF THE RAVINES, THE CALAMITY JANE OF UTTAR PRADESH. Some of the big papers, on the other hand, used a more sober title like: THE MURDERESS, as if the feminine adjective could sum up the extent of Devi's hold on the public imagination.

And so the legend swept through the Valley, nourished

by the dreams of the townspeople. From one end of the gorges to the other, other rumours began to spread, mingled with the memories of some, the illusions of others, to the fears of her enemies and the hopes of her loved ones. Even the most stolid minds began to waver. Was Devi in fact a reincarnation of the sacred Durga, who had been victorious over the demons when the world began? Or the reincarnation of Draupadi, the princess of the ancient epics who swore after the shame brought upon her by the Kaurava kings, to never wash her hair again, unless it was in their blood? Or perhaps she was the ultimate metamorphosis of the Black Kali, the dancer who wore garlands of skulls? Undoubtedly, she was all of these things at the same time. Maybe she was even a new divinity, for in the Valley, those of the lower castes were already moulding clay statuettes in her presumed image, praying before her, offering her flowers, sugar and joss sticks.

Their devotion went further than prayer. It also included all the questions that the townspeople refused to talk about. Why did they no longer speak about the Singh brothers, who had also disappeared into the gorges? Why was Devi so hell-bent on seeking their death? What really happened in the square at Behmai? Not one of the newspapers appeared concerned about these issues. They only talked about Devi, her taste for love- making and for blood.

The way India reacted during the month of March 1981, was much the same as that of peasant girls when faced with a stranger. They lower their gaze, veil their faces, turn the other way and fall silent. Whether they have hopes or fears, no one can ever tell. Not one article spoke of what had happened in Behmai before the massacre. It was, however, impossible to believe that the affair, known to everyone in the Valley, hadn't been brought to the attention of the journalists, or even hinted at. But when it came to talking about this subject, the newspapers remained unanimously tight-lipped.

So the feverish, ardent weeks began, during which

fantasies become confused in much the same way as they do when they are awaiting the rains. As did the impatience to capture Devi, to humiliate her, to adore her, the desire to punish her, to beat her, to hang her high, proclaim her a Goddess, make love to her, or reduce her to ashes. DEVI. WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE. Rs. 1,00,000—Devi, this faceless being, drifting into the most obscure souls, through the first waters, in the form of dreams.

# PART V

A month later, in a rare moment of fury, Inspector-General Verma proposed to the Home Minister, an unusually stringent Bill with regard to the Anti-Dacoit operation. The rather comical title inspired by Mahendra, itself summed up the helplessness of the police.

Any peasant even suspected of sheltering or informing the bandits could be immediately arrested and put in prison. His possessions would be confiscated, and there was no bail. There was only one sentence. Ten years in jail. And of course the bandits could be taken in without a summons.

The Home Minister as well as the Prime Minister approved of this operation. To guarantee its success, they sent two thousand extra policemen, all equipped with binoculars. Six hundred SLR rifles and five hundred light machine-guns were distributed among the police stations in the ravines, the same arms as the dacoits themselves carried. The Central Government provided twenty mortars, which Verma stored in Kalpi. Crazy about blockbusters, he was convinced that the operation against the Bandit Queen would end in a dramatic, pitched battle between the bandits and the police on the banks of the river. These new measures caused an uproar in the newspapers, which was accentuated by the fact that the Singh brothers had just killed three police officers, when they were surprised by a patrol as they attacked an isolated farm. For several days now, the Home Minister tried to hush up the whole business. True to form, the twins had supplemented this triple murder with other gruesome acts. Not content to rob the corpses of their arms and uniforms, the Boss and Tool Box had also carved them up. The limbs and trunks had been stuffed into a rubbish bin. But the testicles were singled out for special treatment. They were ceremoniously grilled before the peasants who had just been looted.

The press took up the story of the massacre once again. The reason for this was quite clear. No matter how important they were, no matter which party they belonged to, the politicians in Behmai, left one by one. The western road had even been levelled and widened to facilitate their comings and goings.

Following the inauguration of the Anti-Dacoit operation, The Statesman, which wasn't in any way given to exaggeration, claimed to report the true sentiments of the townspeople. 'If Devi is bumped off, it will be the most magnificent trophy the police of Uttar Pradesh could ever win. The Bandit Queen cannot lay claim to any mitigating circumstances. Crime doesn't pay. That must be made quite clear.'

In order to tone down the fervour of this appeal for a vendetta, and to appear more sophisticated the journalist had used the word 'nemesis' instead of 'revenge.' Cleverly, it made no reference to Hinduism, but in a subtle way to the divine justice of the Greeks. Nevertheless, it clearly suggested that by attacking men of a higher cast Devi had besmirched the sacred order of things. In the wake of this editorial, several articles on the same theme appeared in the favourite newspapers of the cultivated, middle-class. Devi found herself forbidden access in advance to the land of reincarnation and gods, and therefore from becoming a legend. The longer she escaped the authorities, the faster the public interest in her would fade. Now it was only a question of death.

At the beginning of April, the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh and Inspector General Verma now set their men loose in the ravines. Each time a bandit was killed, a photograph of his corpse appeared in the newspaper, together with incredibly pompous announcement: 'The domain of the bandits is nothing other than a colossus with feet of clay.' To this Verma added during a press conference. 'Soon all that will be left will be bleached bones on which the people can come and spit.'

They hadn't quite reached that point yet. But two months later, the police could take credit for having bumped off seven hundred so-called dacoits. For some of the bigger seizures, easy to identify, or for the faces of some well-known bandits, many

anonymous bodies were presented to the photographers. Everyone knew that they were often poverty-stricken peasants, who were completely innocent. It was also well-known, that since this operation was launched, the promotion of police officers was being linked to the number of corpse they produced for which bloody encounters were being provoked.

Murder squads pure and simple, therefore dotted the ravines, and there was no end to their antics. Every district head, the head of every station, the most insignificant underling, were all obsessed with just one dream: to catch Devi. But she was not to be found. With each passing day, the chances of finding her slipped away. The monsoon was approaching, and the gorges would be bogged down with a deluge of mud.

So, the police killed; in a fit of pique and also out of despair because of the intensifying heat. Besides, they hadn't seen their families for weeks on end; they were tired and hungry. The helicopters and jeeps broke down constantly, making progress difficult. But the Bandit Queen remained elusive.

For two months the valley was overrun by hounding and violence, and it led to complete turmoil. The confusion had reached the ravines of neighbouring states such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, and as far west as Bihar, where particularly vile atrocities were being committed. The non-commissioned officers were blinding the peasants who wouldn't speak, as happened during some of the macabre periods of the Moghul rule. As soon as there was the slightest trouble, the most outrageous rumours would circulate about the gorges. They saw a police uniform coming around the top of the narrow pass. The villagers grew panic-stricken, the moment they saw policemen or bandits—they longer differentiated between the two. Their clothes were the same, as were their cruel methods. They hid, sometimes for two or three days before deciding to come out again.

The only resistance the people of the Valley put up against the authorities was quite unexpected. They chased away with stones the officers who came to collect the taxes. The effects of this revolt were quick and widespread. When Verma took up his

new posting, and decided to cancel the autopsy on the corpses from Behmai, the Thakurs at first murmured, but then said loudly and clearly, that it was the police who had organised the massacre and that the murderers were from the lower castes serving in their ranks. Scuffles immediately broke out among the rival communities, as was so often the case in these circumstances. Some were wounded, others killed. Student demonstrators blocked the roads. Their protests against the brutality of the police were heard as far as Kanpur and Lucknow, and ended up before Parliament.

The Chief Minister was grilled for his ineptitude in curbing crime. Implicitly, this meant his failure to seize Devi. But he replied pompously, outlining perfectly seriously, the draconian measures he intended to take for ending the reign of the gangs. He hadn't quite decided which of the three options to adopt. Whether to unleash leopards trained to attack the gangsters into the ravines, or to flood the gorges under a massive sheet of water, or to exterminate the outlaws by 'bombing' them, as they did in modern warfare.

No one in Parliament objected to any of these fanciful strategies and the confidence in the Chief Minister was once again renewed.

The journalists continued to publish new versions of the massacre here and there, together with hitherto unknown rumours that were presented as being the truth. Was Mahendra hatching, from the confines of his new office, the ultimate scheme? The mysterious diary lost by one of Devi's men during the raid in Sultanpur came to light, and a rumour went around that it contained the names of some senior bureaucrats and ministers who had protected her during her escape. More strife followed in Parliament. The Opposition demanded the resignation of the Chief Minister, for having 'failed to protect the lives and goods of the people, and failure to uphold the law and maintain order.' Thanks to the Thakur votes, and more particularly to the support of the higher castes, he was able to resist this new attack. But his majority was beginning to crumble, and although he waylaid the press with declarations of all-out

war, the Central Government in particular Indira Gandhi, urged him to put an end to these antics.

By now, the Bandit Queen was making news abroad. In Australia and South Africa, home of many Indian emigrants, the newspapers had already published her adventures. The British press, followed by that of the Continent, reported her story soon afterwards. This romantic, bloody saga, brought back to life all the cliches the Western world used with pleasure when they spoke of India; the phantoms of poverty, the smutty daydreams of a Kama Sutra operetta, and the magic of bloody cults. It almost seemed to constitute the only means for westerners to overcome their anxiety when faced with a civilisation that was so simply impenetrable. In short, the few lines given over to Devi in the foreign press were already largely embarrassing fantasies.

Undoubtedly, these articles were only too happy to reproduce the exaggerated reports of the Indian press, themselves inspired by the fertile imagination of certain witnesses, or more often than not, peasants from the Valley who realised as the days went on, that they had been implicated.

People like Indira Gandhi wanted this business to end but it was already too late. The lumbering mechanism of rumour and fantasy rolled on.

At the end of this chaotic Spring, it seemed that the truth, as far as it was possible to establish any kind of truth in this whole matter, was buried underneath a maelstrom of gossip, calls for revenge, solidarity within castes, invectives against the police, and curses against Devi. Although, public opinion was increasingly sceptical about ever catching her, its imagination flowed like a river that had burst its banks. She was apparently spotted everywhere, in Kashmir, Assam, Nepal, and all the way to Ceylon. Once it was claimed that she was in hiding in Lucknow and that she spent her days in the cinema. An hour later all the cinemas in the town had been searched. The next day, in the main cinema, a man thought he recognised Devi, dressed like a peasant woman, sitting beside him, and who made ambiguous advances towards him. She was heavily made-up, and her features seemed to be quite masculine. As soon as they were

tipped off, the police jumped onto the suspect, tackled her and brought her under heavy guard to the police station. It turned out that this temptress was only a transvestite.

This incident was the last straw for the Home Minister, already irritated by the pressure put on him by Indira Gandhi and the latest declarations given to the press by the beautiful Ramkali, Devi's younger sister. When a journalist asked her why her sister had become a dacoit, she had answered, like a simple country girl, and with the tragic nobility of a Mahabharata heroine: 'The gods created men and women. Sometimes the gods transformed the men into saints. It was these men who transform women into bandits.' In a fit of anger, the Home Minister summoned Verma to Lucknow. When he returned, Jain immediately understood from his crest-fallen appearance and panicky gestures that the Minister had given him an ultimatum. He was, however, surprised at the deadline. The Minister had given him only fifteen days to capture the girl, or else face dismissal.



In Mahendra's time, Jain had of course seen this happen many times before and so he reacted to this latest news with indifference. Nevertheless, having suffered for years at the hands of his former boss, Jain now derived a certain pleasure from applying the same perverse methods on the new Inspector-General. He simply smiled, reached out for a wire received the previous day from the Kalpi police station, and handed it over with a sigh:

'Everyone wants to get the girl. Even the other bandits!'

The wire was signed by superintendent Yadav, the officer who had almost caught Devi in the ravines the night of the massacre. According to one of his informers, a few gang leaders had managed to meet up despite police operations. The police all agreed that in order to put an end to the man-hunt that was destroying the Valley and disrupting its smooth running, the girl would have to be killed. The only problem was, they were

reluctant to spill the blood of a woman. Only Sobaran who had recently lost five men in a police ambush, declared that he had no such scruples and already knew how he would set about it.

'More rumours,' Verma said, throwing the wire back into the sea of files that still covered Jain's desk. 'Absolute rubbish, pure invention!'

'I don't think so.'

He had tried to imitate the short, hissing intonations of Mahendra. But he realised at once that he wasn't succeeding.

'There is no one as crafty as Sobaran. If this information wound up on Yadav's desk, it is because he wanted it to. And so did the other bandits; all those that we haven't arrested, and who have no desire to be murdered next...'

Strangely enough, this argument was enough for Verma's cockiness to return.

Verma had already turned a chair around to face his desk, and proceeded to sit in it backwards, like a hero in a western. He threw him a searching look and said:

'I'm listening.'

Jain decided to broach the subject carefully. From every point of view, Sobaran's involvement was good. He would be the one taking all the risks; he would be capable of killing the girl in one go. Naturally, they would probably have to negotiate with him, as they had with the Singh brothers when they bumped off Vikram Mallah. It would be the same deal: he would be exempted from punishment in exchange for the corpse of the Bandit Queen. Sobaran would, in all likelihood, argue, quibble and split hairs. But once he accepted, he wouldn't go back on his word.

'But he will have to get the girl to come out of hiding,' Verma objected.

'We'll use bait.'

'What sort? We don't know where she is!'

'We will throw her something she can't resist.'

Verma's eyes popped out. Jain had difficulty trying not to smile. He continued in the same smooth voice:

'Mustaqeen's dead body.'

'What are you getting at? What are you trying to say?'

He was beginning to panic. Jain stifled another smile, and went on, in a relaxed tone:

'Since the Behmai massacre, Mustaqeen hasn't been seen anywhere. Nor any member of his gang. The same goes for the girl... They are more than likely in the same hide-out.'

'So?'

'It is now three months; three months since he was holed up with that chick... Mustaqeen never liked women. And that one is a real catastrophe! They will split up as soon as they can. And when that happens...'

Judging by the increasingly bewildered look on Verma's face, Jain thought it would be a better move to persuade the Inspector-General that it was in fact his idea. So he continued calmly:

'I am sure you have already thought of that.'

Then he sank back into the folds of his flesh. The effect he had hoped for didn't take long in coming. Jain waited a few minutes, and then reckoning that Verma still hadn't grasped what he was getting at, he pointed to the miniscule opening on the opposite wall. It revealed a streak of leaden sky.

'That's right, the rains...'

'The rains,' Verma stuttered.

There still wasn't even a flicker of comprehension. Once again, Jain came to his rescue:

'It's true, we are all the same. At the moment that's all we can think about. And the bandits are like everyone else...'

Again, Verma looked confusedly at his colleague.

'So why not behave like cretins? No more patrols on the river, no more helicopters. Why not lie low? And our men, don't you think that...?'

He pretended to hesitate for a moment. Verma immediately took advantage of this:

They are exhausted.

'Precisely. Give them some leave...'

'I thought about that this morning,' Verma cut in.

'We are exhausted too you know,' Jain interrupted. 'I can't wait for it all to be over.'

'Absolutely. I can't wait for the rains!...'

With this Verma, followed Jain's gaze through the narrow skylight.

Verma now drew the fan close to his face, closed his eyes and said in a dull voice:

'And now what?'



As it happened, the next step was far more complicated. Although life with Verma was hardly exciting, it gave Jain unquestionable pleasure. It was entirely devoid of any kind of surprise. Either Verma repudiated his ideas without any explanation, or he immediately gave them his full approval. And from the moment a decision had been taken, Verma put it into action, step by step, with a blind energy that for want of any other qualities, was probably what procured him Mahendra's position. As a result, Jain didn't feel in the least bit embarrassed when he had to explain all the ins and outs of his trap. He was entirely of the conviction that as soon as the police stopped tracking them down, Devi and Mustaqeen would come out of their hiding place. Although, it wasn't sure that the girl would try to see her family again, as far as Mustaqeen was concerned it was a certainty. No one could explain, why he went at least once a month to see his cousin, Immamuddin, who lived in a big town on the edge of Highway 2. All they had to do was keep watch and wait patiently for the moment to nab him. They would shoot him down as soon as he arrived. But this time they would do things properly. They would return the body to his family, and treat the murder as a hero's death, an appropriate end for an honourable bandit. In short, they would make an event out of Mustaqeen's death which would allow them to forget all the blunders of the past weeks. Considering Mustaqeen had helped her the day of the massacre, she would be obliged to come and kiss his feet as custom demanded when owed the dead man a debt. Of course, she wasn't mad, and would come

in disguise. But she would come. And that is where Sobaran came in. He would expose her; they could be sure of that. In fact, it was just a question of nerves. And for once, of technique.

'If we do it discreetly, it is going to take us more than fifteen days,' Verma remarked.

His voice was sober, although he continued to place his face in front of the blades of the fan, visibly delighted with himself.

'Not necessarily,' Jain argued.

'The Minister...'

'It could be faster than we think,' Jain cut in, pointing again to the segment of sky and the black clouds crossing back and forth behind his little window. He continued, shaking his head:

'They must be at the end of their tether in their hide-out.'

Verma didn't answer.

'And what if Mustaqeen comes out and the girl doesn't?' he finally asked.

'She'll come out.'

'What if she is no longer in the ravines? If she is in Delhi, or Nepal? In Ceylon?'

'You are not going to start on that too...'

It was the first time Jain had ever been insolent, a moment of exasperation which, like everything else, could be put down to the heat. But this thoughtless gesture had an unexpected effect. Verma was now goaded into action. He shouted from the corridor:

'Go on Jain, make up your mind, organise your coup.'

At that moment Verma whispered to Jain his remarkable idea. That very day the police had been ordered to refer to Devi only by a code name, I.R. 40. It had been chosen arbitrarily, but it showed the indifference with which they now plotted her death.

## *100*

In the middle of June, as the heatwave was becoming unbearable, Devi and Mustaqeen left their refuge in the Hanuman temple and decided to separate. For more than a week now they hadn't

seen a single helicopter pass over their hide-out. Neither had there been any calls for revenge on the radio, or reports enumerating the bandits they had shot down, as if they were game.

Devi was doubtful, when the men began to mutter that things were calming down. 'Just because you want it to, things are not going calm down.' Then she withdrew into total silence again.

For once Mustaqeen agreed with her. He straightened himself up, smoothed down his moustache as he did before making important announcements, then said 'Beware of a dog that doesn't bark.' That day, the men didn't appear to be overly impressed, so he solemnly added: 'The man who has desires always ends up losing that very desire.'

Midday fell in the Gohani ravine, the kind of pallid noons that come before the rains, filling the crevices with its scorching rays. The thirsty man waved his hand towards the peaks: 'Things are calming down,' he repeated. 'They are no longer coming out of their dug outs.' Leaning against a pillar, Lukka sided with him: 'The cops are like everyone else; they are snoozing. And dying of the heat.' Then, he too pointed to the sky laden with clouds on the other side of the crests.

From the expression on his face, it seemed as if he were making some calculation. Behind him, their eyes half-closed, the men watched his every move; they appeared to be relieved when he finally said: 'Maybe it would be a good idea if we split before the rains.'

Neither Mustaqeen, nor Devi, who were both sitting in the middle of the awning, attempted to contradict him; though, they didn't agree either. Like the others, they remained silent and waited for the news bulletin to know about the temperatures and rains. The news-reader forecasted that they would begin the following week.

Under the awning, no one moved an inch. The men continued to stare at the summits of the gorges. Only Lukka found the energy to repeat: 'It would be better if we left before we get trapped by the mud.'

According to Lukka, Gohani was a good hiding place, probably the best one in the Valley, but it was a snake pit, like all hiding places are, and the men couldn't stand the thought of staying one more minute there. 'To tell the truth, we were all fed up. We were just looking for any excuse to leave and to go wherever we wanted to go. No one actually said anything, but we had had enough.'

The gang had landed up unexpectedly in the Gohani gorge six weeks earlier at the beginning of May, after a long detour through the south. They had repeatedly come up against patrols before that and so Mustaqeen suggested they move towards the north, cross the river once more and get to Gohani, Babu's former hiding place.

Just the word Gohani was enough to arouse Devi's anger. 'Naturally,' Lukka recalls, 'it must have reminded her of Babu. She had also met Vikram in Gohani, I remember that as if it were only yesterday.' She threw herself at Mustaqeen and screamed: 'Are you crazy or what? Didn't you hear what they said on the radio? They are patrolling the river. The cops have rockets; they will burn us alive!' We were all flabbergasted. Since we had left the ravines in Kalpi, Mustaqeen and she hadn't been speaking to each other. It had really annoyed Mustaqeen to hear her singing when we had come across the police that time. As soon as we were out of the gorges, he had given her a good dressing down, and since then Devi had been sulking, leaving him to command the men as he wished. But when she started screaming her head off, he wasn't in the least bit ruffled. He just laughed into her face. 'You have no choice, my girl! You have brought this misfortune upon us, and if you are still dogged by bad luck, it is because you deserve it.' With this, he threw his transistor at her feet: 'Do you hear what's happening now. All this is because of you?'

Lukka felt that perhaps Mustaqeen had gone too far this time. For a minute he even thought that Devi was going to kill him, and that in fact he deserved it: 'Because we had transistors, we knew what had happened as a result of the events in Behmai. We had heard about the townspeople who had become

hysterical, and the cops who had been sent into the ravines like ravenous tigers. But as far as we were concerned, we knew that we hadn't been lucky. Someone had betrayed us. The procession never turned up. The Singh brothers had been alerted. But it wasn't Devi's fault. In any case, she had nothing to do with all the rubbish involving the police, and no one in the gang would have dared to blame her for it. Not one of them had understood why Mustaqeen had reacted that way. But Devi was incredibly cool. She listened to everything without comment. That day when Mustaqeen insulted her, she reacted in exactly the same way. She looked straight into his eyes without flinching. But Mustaqeen had also decided he had had enough. Meeting her gaze, he repeated that she brought them bad luck. In moments such as this one, whoever shoots first has the last word, and as Devi didn't move I really thought that she was finished. However, she was so unusually quiet that Mustaqeen didn't dare draw his gun. And that really put him off. So she retorted: "How can you talk about unhappiness; you the Great Mustaqeen. You still haven't confronted your destiny." With that she turned her back to him. She had left me flabbergasted yet again. To hear her speaking like that, when the radio blared that she was the greatest bitch in the country... But that was just typical of Devi. The more she was attacked, the higher she held her head. Rebellion was in her blood.'

Man Singh followed her and succeeded in bringing her back. She still seemed rather hesitant to follow the gang; Lukka heard Man Singh saying to her in a low voice: 'Come on Devi, we can't stay here. It would be better if we crossed back over the river. We'll see later, when the rains begin. We will stay together, no matter what happens.' She shook her head and answered: 'Alright, we'll see. We'll wait for the rains.'

'The way she said this was as much a threat as a promise,' Lukka recalls. 'She tied up her backpack and started walking, as if nothing had happened. Mustaqeen and she began to provoke each other again. No one had really understood what she had meant by referring to his destiny. Neither did anyone dare ask her. They walked in silence, the radio on. Only once was she

affected, when the definitive number of deaths that had occurred in Behmai, was announced. Exceptionally, she opened her mouth to utter. Twenty-three; that's good. A corpse for each day spent with those dogs in Behmai. The Gods do some fine work when they put their minds to it.' The words sounded strange to us. Thanks to the radio reports, we had completely forgotten what the brothers had done to her. All we could think of were the happenings in Behmai; about Attu's craziness and his butchery. How did we reach this breaking point, we wondered.

Despite everything, the trek north and the journey to the other side of the bank to Gohani, in boats, went off without a hitch. But once there, Devi became very gloomy. Not only was it because she had come back to the Hanuman temple and all her memories were being dredged up, together with the ghosts of Babu, Kailash and Vikram, as Lukka had predicted. It was also due to the manner in which she heard her story being told on the radio for weeks on end now; the way in which her life was publicised, analysed, reinvented day after day.

'She didn't even move when we saw the helicopters overhead,' Lukka remembers. 'We knew that they couldn't possibly see us. Even from the stream, the temple was invisible. It was one with the earth. All the same, as soon as we heard the engines, we made a dash for the back-rooms. But Devi just stayed put, like a sitting duck. The only time she stirred into action was the morning when the radio reported on the twins latest exploits. She sprang to her feet and started to scream: "When is someone going to bring those two down, when?" She hopped up and down like a child. Then she picked up her machine-gun and disappeared into a maze and took potshots at an old tree. She made such a din! We were scared stiff. But yet again, we neither said nor did anything. Anymore than Mustaqeen or Man Singh did. We just waited for it to end.'

About the same time, the supplies started getting low. To begin with, no one was worried; the men weren't hungry, and they were happy to drink tea mixed with powdered milk and sugar. But eventually the milk ran out, and the stream was drying up little by little. The men's spirits were sinking just as quickly.

They didn't know what to do with their time anymore.

'We were imprisoned without actually being in prison,' Lukka remarked. 'We brooded. We had visions of the massacre all over again. We thought about our parents and our friends in the Valley. We continually asked ourselves how we came to be there and how we could get out of this situation. Like the guys on the radio, we mixed everything up; we no longer knew what had really happened. It was as if the dust had found its way into our heads and jammed up our brains. Already, little cliques had come up within the band; men closeted together in twos or threes. In fact, in our minds, we had already gone our ways.'

The decision to move camp, however, remained entirely Devi's and Mustaqeen's responsibility. Both persisted in remaining silent. Mustaqeen was particularly irritating. He was still the same, despite the heat and imminent hunger.

But he must have been dying of boredom too. One evening when most of the men had gone down to the stream, he took Lukka aside and asked him in a low voice: 'Do you remember what the soothsayer told me?' He had begun studying his palm again. No longer, did he speak in solemn tones. His words gushed forth giving Lukka no chance to catch him off-guard or ask the smallest question. For the first time ever, Mustaqeen told him about his family and his life: 'I have a cousin called Immamuddin, who has a very beautiful daughter. He married her off to an old man when she was only thirteen. She is twenty-two now, but she hasn't any children. The last time I saw her, the old man was very ill. I want to marry that girl. I have already spoken to my cousin about it. He has agreed to it. So once the old man is dead, we will go and arrange for the dowry. We will take care of the whole business together. I only want the best. Immamuddin and I have decided to buy the jewellery in Bombay. But it is somewhat strange that the soothsayer didn't say anything about this girl the other day.'

'You should have seen him,' Lukka went on, 'he was dying to ask me what I thought; he could hardly contain himself; he just had to have my opinion! He was very tense, sad and worried. But that was typical before the rains, when even the strongest

men were affected by anxiety.' Kalla and Lukka too had plans for the future, possibly to become snake charmers in Agra and play before the hotels. But the problem was Devi; her ransom poster was plastered everywhere. 'We had to find a way of hiding her for a few weeks, maybe even months.' Lukka decided to speak Man Singh about it.

Not at all surprised by Lukka's proposals, Man Singh immediately thought the best hiding place for Devi would be one of the big towns. After a few moments he added: 'I think Baladin's wife works near Kanpur, in a brickyard.' Lukka wasn't sure about this, so they confirmed with Baladin. Baladin quickly understood what they wanted. It would be easy for a village girl to get work there. The workers were expected to work silently and hard, for eight rupees a day, food and lodgings near the factory. But Devi would have to behave like all the other women, Baladin warned them. She would have to live alone, basically far from Man Singh, until she had been forgotten.

Man Singh's heart was in his boots when he finally took the plunge two days later, and told Devi about his future plans. He was so perturbed that he shook, but even before he began to speak, she knew what he had come to tell her. 'We are going to separate, aren't we? And you don't really know what to do with me?...'

She sat down on her tarpaulin and laughed out a loud, something she hadn't done for weeks on end: 'Come on, I saw what you were up to with Lukka and Baladin. Everything has already been decided. Do whatever you want with me. I'm strong, I can manage.'

She looked neither too sad, nor particularly happy. No longer had she a grip on anything. Pointing to the sky, lower than ever that particular morning, she wiped her forehead and sighed: 'The time has come.'

'The strangest thing is that Mustaqeen had used the very same words, before cutting off his moustache in two swift movements of the hand. It was as though he had been going over the whole thing in his head for days before that, Lukka

concluded. 'It was just as well his cousin's daughter had married an old man. At least that way she wouldn't be too choosy. No one could recognise him anymore. He was no longer the Great Mustaqeen. Just a really ugly guy. And with what a nose!'



Throughout the journey to Kanpur, Devi wondered what Mira, Baladin's wife looked like. She was supposed to find her a job at the brickyard. 'She is a beautiful woman, Baladin answered each time she had asked him about the job. She gave me three wonderful children.'

And that was all she could get out of him. Man Singh had never actually met her, but he seemed so sure about the whole thing that Devi wasn't worried anymore. It was only when she found herself in the bus going to Kanpur that she started to feel panicky. After a while, she felt so demoralised that several times she almost got off the bus and turned back. Nevertheless, following the instructions Baladin and Man Singh had given her, she located the factory and the small pond where the workers washed themselves at the end of the day. She waited there until evening, veiled, completely overpowered by the situation. Man Singh had prompted her: 'From now on, you are an orphan peasant girl, a Mallah from Etawah. Your name is Lila. You have just lost your husband, and are on your way to meet your friend Mira in the brick factory.' Devi had objected. 'But...if some guy on the road or in the bus...' He hadn't even let her finish her sentence. 'Nothing will happen to you. I will bring you to the bus. Go straight to the factory, look for Mira, show her Baladin's seal, give her the money that he has sent her, and you will be employed.'

Panic gripped her in particular, when after being jostled on the bus she came across the poster, stating the ransom for her capture. Immediately, she realised that the photograph looked nothing like her. Nevertheless, she began to tremble. To calm herself, she started murmuring the Nagamantra, for she could

see that this ghostly face, plastered all over place, had a certain power. It was striking, and acted like a magnet on all who looked at it, even on Devi herself. Once more she thought of running like the wind. But found herself incapable of it.

She remembered the promise she had made to Man Singh just before she had set off. To get a job come what way and not to budge from the factory until he had given her the all-clear, when the police had calmed down. In front of the bus, he had wanted to go over it all once again. But she had stopped him. 'But you Man Singh, are you sure that you will be safe in Kalla's village? Do you not think that you will noticed with Baladin and Lukka? And do you really think that the cops will have forgotten about me after the rains?...'

'I swear to it,' Man Singh had answered. Now that there were only four of them, they were no longer a band. Kalla's village was isolated, they would be safe there. Man Singh ended as before: 'When you find Mira, you won't have to explain anything to her. She will understand. She isn't a bandit's wife for nothing you know.'

For the last time Devi had asked him what she looked like. But she got no answer, or at least if she did, she didn't hear it. Pushed into the bus, a sea of passengers and various bundles swallowed her up.

She remained perfectly still at the edge of the pond, waiting for Mira. The file came to a standstill. She began to tremble under her sari veil, and to repeat the Nagamantra. A rustling of cloth, almost like a murmur, approached. Then she heard a harsh voice shouting:

'You, you are looking for work!'

Just the tone revived her. She pushed back her veil, stood up to be met with a bright expression, and a head held high. Mira's name came to her lips. But she didn't even have time to open her mouth, or to show her Baladin's seal, which was on the envelope he had placed the money in for her. The woman had already taken her by the hand:

'Come and wash. You look dirty.'

Her voice was warm now. She was wearing Mallah jewellery.

But she had a severe look in her eyes, and the pupils were dotted with gold flecks, as they were in women of higher castes. Devi gave in, and began to keep pace with Mira. The other woman stared at her unashamedly. Devi allowed herself to be looked over from head to foot like a baby, or a piece of merchandise. The woman didn't miss a single detail. Not one of the marks of her escapades, still embedded in her nails, filthy from the red dust of the ravines, or in the grease stains at the hem of her sari. Not even the calluses at the tip of her phalanx. As her eyes registered all this, they sparkled even more, seemingly amused.

The other women had walked on indifferently, and had reached the pond where they were shaking themselves off as they washed. The woman said with one last smile:

'I was sure I would meet you one day...'



The work at the factory was thankless, twelve hours carrying baskets full of bricks between the ovens and the lorries daily. But the most difficult part of it all was to be like the other women again. However, she had no other choice.

Mira resembled Baladin, insofar as she didn't like talking either. Devi managed to find out that her father had been a bandit; but that was all. Her family lived in an isolated village, and he had taught her how to shoot. Then she met Baladin. For a while she had followed him in a gang, but had soon become pregnant. So she returned to her father's village. Last year during the attacks on the Highway, the police had suspected Baladin, and while searching her home had discovered arms in the loft. She had been brought down to the police station, and beaten up badly. Despite this, she hadn't talked. However, when she heard about the raid in Sultanpur, she had taken the precaution of leaving her children with her sister who lived near Etawah, and herself taken shelter in the factory where no one knew her.

Baladin regularly sent her messages and money for his children so she never really worried. At the same time, she did listen to her little transistor every evening, and knew of the massacre at Behmai, as well as the big man-hunt going on in the Valley. She also knew about Devi, and had seen her facsimile plastered all over the bus-stop.

Devi immediately asked her if it was from this picture that she had recognised her. Mira laughed quietly, as earlier. 'It resembles you, as much as a donkey does a panther!...' We recognise those who live in the ravines from their eyes; eyes like that of wild animals, when they wander out of the forest...' 'So the police...' Devi interrupted her. 'Don't worry about the police,' Mira went on. 'They drink too much beer. Soft in the head, they can't see anything clearly...' Her face darkened again: 'It would be best for you to put the two brothers out of your head. Pull yourself together. The last tiger hunt ends up in the furriers. Don't forget that. The other day, too much blood was spilt...'

She never actually mentioned Behmai, but referred to it as 'the other day,' in a low voice, as if she were somehow afraid. For all that, Mira was never haughty; there was just something about her that was imposing. She was tall, well-built. Every part of her was grand, her chest, her arms, even her smile. She was a mother, a distant and majestic mother, carrying her basket of bricks on her head as she would a crown. There was an aura of secrecy about her, and the same sort of mystery lay in the golden flecks that danced in her eyes. From time to time, the other women sensed this, and stared at her jealously.

Towards the end of June, the thunder started rumbling over in the ravines. The number of workers began to grow, and the dormitory was soon crowded. A few days later the first flood broke.

It happened one evening, as Mira was listening to her transistor. It was dark. The women had collapsed onto their mats, suffocated more than ever by the steaming heat. It began as a tiny, metallic patter, and quickly rose to a deafening rattle. This seemed to annoy Mira, and she pressed the radio closer to

her ear. A gust of hot air swept through the dormitory, lifting up the women's veils. And like a large sailing boat suddenly filled with air, they all surged forward and went outside.

It wasn't a capricious, passing shower, as the first ones so often are, but one which afforded them the greatest pleasure. They lapped it up without reserve, their breasts outstretched, arms hanging by their sides. For once, their souls flowed with their perspiration.

When Devi returned to the hangar to wipe the rain off her body, there was chaos everywhere. The women were shaking themselves dry, combing their hair, and talking so loudly that it was impossible to hear anything. Mira wasn't there anymore. Devi didn't look for her, thinking she had stayed outside to savour the last gasps of the storm. As soon as she was dry, she fell asleep.

She must have woken up around dawn. The rain had stopped. The door of the hangar was wide open as usual and a moon, almost full, lit up the dormitory.

Mira's place was still empty. But this time Devi noticed that her bag and her cover had also disappeared.

She had left, without any warning or explanation. It looked as if she had been waiting for an opportunity to go, and the downpour had provided the perfect excuse. Unless, she had suddenly had some news that was so bad that she had to leave without seeking her opinion...

The last thing she could remember was Mira pressing the radio to her ear. 'Something has happened,' she repeated to herself. 'She wanted to warn me, but she couldn't find me.' On the third morning as the file of women made its way towards the factory, passing by the Highway as usual, Devi was approached by an extremely thin, young man, dressed like a peasant, sheltering under an umbrella. In a low voice, he told her to draw nearer. She was the last one in the file and no one could see that she was no longer moving along. He lifted his right hand towards her and opened it brusquely. The palm had Man Singh's seal drawn with a red felt pen on it.

'Come on,' the man repeated.

The cobra with five heads was drawn in large strokes within the aura of flames, which was by now beginning to run. But it was definitely Man Singh's work. She recognised his awkward, childish strokes. Devi turned her head, pulled her veil over her eyes and moved under the tree. The man followed her. As soon as she knew that no one could see her, she turned towards him, pushed back her veil and stared. He was a total stranger, and his miserable look was of one who could only bring bad news. So she decided to make the first move:

'Baladin?'

He shook his head.

'Man Singh?'

The man smiled and opened his palm again.

'As you can see, he is the one who did the drawing.'

He had a sickly voice and was trembling all over, either from fever or hunger, she couldn't make out which.

'It must be Mustaqeen then.'

It wasn't really a question, any more than the man's silence was really one. It was more like a long interval in which everything, that can never be spoken about is told. She sighed, and then retorted:

'The cops. Is that it?'

'He was at a cousin's house. He wanted to get married. He was going to get the dowry...'

This was too much for her. She was overcome by a fit of laughter:

'Wanted to get married...Mustaqeen?'

She leaned against a tree as though suddenly exhausted, and repeated over and over again:

'He who always said... What was it again? The man of desire dies because of his desire...'

She started laughing again. The man stared at her, terrified. She pushed away his hand smeared with ink, grabbed the umbrella and pointed the way to the bus-stop which was just in front of the factory:

'Come on, let's go.'

The messenger brought Devi to where Man Singh, Lukka and Baladin were hiding, in Kalla's village. This orphan boy had been abandoned a long time ago and lived in a house with no women. The neighbours paid no attention to his return, nor to the fact that there were three strangers living in his home. For all intents and purposes, the rains had already numbed the village. Except for perhaps a few old men, sitting bored under their awnings, no one noticed Devi.

The reunion with the gang was unemotional. This saga was seen as a cog in the tangled confusion of a machine, which there was no point in trying to understand. Devi had only just arrived in Kalla's home when Man Singh unceremoniously announced that Baladin had gone to see his children in Etawah and that he would be back any moment now to pay his respects to Mustaqeen's remains. Man Singh perhaps wanted to ask her a question. But she had so many herself, in particular how had Mustaqeen been killed.

Man Singh had everything worked out. He explained to her that Mustaqeen's body was laid out in his cousin, Immamuddin's house, in Dastampur on Highway 2, not far from the spot where he had been nabbed by the police. He had met an atrocious end, his death being cruel, as it was unexpected. For some unknown reason, Mustaqeen and his cousin had decided to go to Bombay. Dressed as peasants, they were waiting for the bus by the highway, when they were approached by a police patrol. Mustaqeen, as careful as ever, had given his gun to Immamuddin, who hid it in the bottom of his balluchon. Never having faced the police in his entire life, Immamuddin got frightened and tried to run away. An immediate scuffle followed. Immamuddin and Mustaqeen bolted and found themselves in an open field. As no one had shot at them, they carried on running until they reached the first ravine, still entirely unsuspecting. There, another patrol was waiting for them. The two men were quickly pushed against a cliff. Mustaqeen begged the police to spare his cousin. He gave them all

the money he had; a huge sum, it would appear. The police pocketed the banknotes, then shoved him and his cousin down to the bottom of another gorge. Immamuddin was shot first, through the temple. Then it was Mustaqeen's turn. A single shot from a revolver in his mouth. Naturally, the version the police gave was entirely different. According to them, Mustaqeen and his cousin had been arrested as they were about to attack a bus. They escaped into a ravine, where they had seemingly preferred to commit suicide than to turn themselves in. As a mark of respect for their chivalrous behaviour, which had spared the police launching a pitched battle and probably the loss of several human lives, the head of the Dastampur station had decided to return the body to the family so that it could be buried with Islamic rites.

People came from far and wide to pay homage. Some remembered Mustaqeen as a wrestling champion. But the majority knelt before his corpse to pray, for they considered him to be the Valley's greatest benefactor, in fact almost a saint. Here was a man who had paid for the education of many penniless students out of the fortune he amassed from kidnapping. He had bought medicines for the lepers, found wet nurses for the orphans, and had never once killed a man just for the sake of it.

On this occasion, the legend was justified. Lukka and Kalla, who had wandered around the neighbourhood of Dastampur, reckoned that was why the police were powerless and had no control over, what amounted to a great pilgrimage.

The best time to approach the coffin would be in the dead of night, when even the wailers and the relations of the dead man would be overcome by exhaustion. In any case, none of them could do much to make peace with Mustaqeen's soul. Not even Devi, who owed him so much. They were to slip into the room where the lifeless body was, to pray for a moment, and kiss his feet. Devi would be the last to enter, and as soon as she had finished, they would leave.

Lukka, who was usually so cautious, approved of the whole plan as being free of any danger. He believed the rains had dulled

the police. Though they were four of them, they could easily mingle among the crowds that would be mourning Mustaqeen. The billows of incense that would engulf him and indeed the entire funeral chamber would also act as a screen. He turned to Devi and said: 'You owe Mustaqeen a lot, you know. Now that they have his hide, the police are going to forget about you...'

This time Lukka had spoken without any trace of irony. His dry tone reflected a growing indifference.

Man Singh, who had just gone into the courtyard to smoke some charas, himself wore the same look. Totally serene, he stared at the roads of the gorges, now a purplish-blue with the threatening rainstorm. Each one to his destiny, his look seemed to say. Everything has been decided a long time ago, since the first dawn, the god's first throw of the dice. No matter how long Devi looked at Man Singh, she couldn't imagine what he was thinking about. And it was the same for Lukka. They were really gripped by day dreaming. So much so that a few minutes later when he saw Baladin hurtling down the paths of the ravine, his face worn, his large frame completely covered in mud, he showed no surprise, and didn't move an inch.

On the other hand, as soon as Baladin saw Devi at the end of the courtyard, he started to run, tearing along until he was out of breath. Throwing all caution to the winds, he shouted out before he had even reached Kalla's house:

'Devi! Where is Mira?'

He was stamping his feet angrily, and was streaming all over with perspiration and rain.

She stuttered two or three words but stopped herself almost immediately. Baladin's eyes hardened as if he had just solved a mystery only known to him. Then pointing to the road he had just left behind, bogged down with mud, he said in a low voice:

'If she isn't here, I have to leave again. I must prevent her...'

Crouched in another corner of the courtyard, Lukka, like Man Singh, wore an irritated look, of one who has been woken up from his sleep. Coldly he remarked:

'Not a fuss about a woman again...Stop her from doing what?'

On hearing this Baladin, who was rarely heard, towered above him, and pointing at Devi,' roared into his face:

'From doing the same thing as she did, you cretin! From taking revenge!'



It was an enormous insult, even if it had been tacitly agreed that the band would dissolve. No one moved apart from Kalla, at the other end of the courtyard. He had seemed bored until that moment and his handsome face now lit up in a mocking smile. Truly, it was impossible to imagine a more unusual confrontation. There was Lukka, old and thin, full of tricks and calculated moves, trying to decipher the moist expression of the gigantic Baladin with his eagle eye. Baladin for his part had flexed his muscles and tried to impose himself on Lukka, apparently getting ready to knock him down with the back of his hand any moment.

But Lukka must have felt Kalla's sarcasm far more than the outright insult, because he abruptly turned away from Baladin and grumbled:

'I know that in the past Mustaqeen took your wife into the gang. But so what? That's past history...'

'With girls like Mira, there is no such thing as past history.'

'The cops killed her father. If she had wanted to get rid of them, she would have already done so. Besides, how long did she stay in Mustaqeen's gang? Three months?'

'She still has her gun!...'

Lukka gave a little chuckle.

'After the beating the cops gave her last year when they were looking for you...'

'Precisely.'

'Precisely what? Do you think it's a good time...?'

He didn't get to finish what he was saying. Baladin had just knocked over two copper pitchers standing on a low wall, with the back of his hand, and they now rolled among the empty bottles and peels that messed up the yard. Then he turned to Devi:

'When did you last see her?'

'Two days ago. No three, just when the rains...'

She was getting bogged down. Everything was getting confused; more than anything else, this new story of a woman who wanted to take revenge. Rage took over, as she thought of another bitch carrying a gun.

In front of her, Baladin seemed to be getting impatient. So she went on:

We were listening to the radio. The rain had begun and I left the dormitory. When I came back...'

'She was no longer there,' Baladin cut in. 'She had left without any warning. She did the same thing to her sister.'

Devi turned to Man Singh:

'The radio... Did you listen to it?'

'Do you really think we would just sit here, if there had been a rumpus?'

Man Singh, who also seemed anxious to bring the whole affair to an end, kicked an empty can away from him. Devi came back to Baladin:

'And what did her sister say?'

'Mira turned up at her house two days ago; she wanted to see her children. She spent all her time with them. And then this morning, just before I arrived...'

He picked up the two pots that had fallen, pulled a page out of the magazine that had continued to whirl in the monsoon wind and set about cleaning off the mud splotched on the pots before going on:

'We didn't see her. I thought that she was here.'

Once more Lukka saw fit to snigger:

'A woman's heart is like a cat's eyes. It is ever-changing.'

He gave Kalla a knowing smile. But a perverse power must have come between these two men who had been so close, because now it was indubitably wrenching them apart. The handsome Kalla didn't react, for once, to Lukka's smirk. He withdrew, hardened, lowered his eyes. And when he raised them, they shifted over to Baladin. In a voice, that would soothe a child, he said,

'Come on, we'll catch up with her. If Mira wants to take revenge, she would have gone to fetch her gun. She is in your village, in your house. How far is your village from here? Two or three hours, isn't it?...'

Then he added, looking at Devi:

'Meet us tonight just before Dastampur, in the market town by the side of the road. Hold on, I've got it: Ramnagar, that's it, Ramnagar...'

He seemed to calm down as he spoke, leaning against the moist wall. Quiet, and full of youthful confidence, he smiled now as he started putting his plan together. No one dared move, not even Lukka. All that could be heard in the courtyard was the constant flutter of the magazine pages.

'Do you remember Lukka,' Kalla continued with the same smile, 'There is an old temple on the road leading out of the town, not far from a big peepal tree. We will meet up with you before sunset. We will only have to hide in the temple until midnight. And then...'

This was too much for Lukka. He took a step towards Kalla and angrily stomped the pages of the magazine.

'What are you doing running around, instead of staying here quietly with me...'

Kalla shifted away from the wall, bent down and pulled out the magazine from under Lukka's foot:

'Don't touch it! It's mine.'

As far as Devi is concerned, that was when everything was played out for one last time.



She didn't have a single word to say against Kalla, nor against Baladin. She said nothing whatsoever to try to stop them leaving. Ordinarily her face would have darkened, she would have stood in front of them, drawn to her full height, and shouted: 'No!'. Then she would have spoken, as Vikram had done when the men were feeling low, using words commonly voiced by all great gang

leaders. 'If we live together, we will die together, and make decisions together. Either we'll stay or we'll depart, but we will not separate. Separation means submission; lowering our defences. And that will never happen, never!'

But instead she said nothing, not a word. Nor did she make any gesture. She didn't cry out or sigh. When the two men turned to go into the mire of the gorges, Man Singh too simply looked irritated and scraped at the clay walls.

The sky displayed the same indifference. No omens, not even a vague premonition. A total silence, a nothingness. As if the gods enjoyed blinding the souls of these mere puppets, which they all probably were since the beginning of time, each one trapped in a cruel game.

They stuck to their plan. At sunset, Man Singh, Devi and Lukka stood in Ramnagar under the colonnade of the old temple, on the road leading out of the village near the Highway. As Kalla had promised, a huge peepal tree sheltered the sanctuary. Not far from there, a small river gushed, hemmed in by large ghats, blackened over the years by funeral pyres.

The Highway itself was calm. Mud splattered lorries festooned with garlands passed by in the distance; they raised enormous whorls of muck which splashed back onto the roadside. Then silence fell again. They didn't have to wait long. As the sun was setting, Devi caught sight of Kalla and Baladin on the bridge, as had been arranged. Mira was following them. A lorry shot out from the direction of the bridge, and so the three shadows withdrew into the ditch that ran the length of the road, then picked themselves up again.

How long did it take? Five, ten seconds. Devi only just had the time to stand up and murmur: 'Mira is there; they found her ...' Within seconds, a file of jeeps shot out from behind the lorry and stopped right in front of it. The police sprang out of the vehicles. One of them, who had jumped out of the first jeep roared: 'It's her; it's her alright; we have found her!' Another, who was standing in the drivers seat of the second vehicle shouted in turn: 'Be careful, she is probably armed!' At the same time the other policeman jumped on Mira.

He flung her into the mud. From that moment on there was total confusion. The remaining policemen jumped out of their jeeps; there was a scuffle, insults were exchanged. Devi, Man Singh and Lukka hid behind the railing of the temple from where they could only hear the purring of the engines. They thought, they heard jeeps turning around on the road. Then in a calm, slightly drawling voice, a man announced over a loudspeaker: 'That's alright; now search the village and block the road and all the tracks.'

'Kalla's neighbours,' Lukka whispered. 'They were spying on us. I was sure of it...'

Devi put her hand over his mouth, then risked taking a quick look over the railing. The police were spreading out on the other side of the Highway where the village houses were huddled together. She whispered to the two men:

'The tree.'

With a nod of his head, Man Singh agreed. But Lukka pouted:

'What about the snakes?'

'Snakes or no snakes...,' Devi grumbled, and was the first to mount the trunk.

She climbed as high as she could to avoid disturbing the snakes. That is if there were any, because the rains had just begun. Man Singh had some difficulty joining her as he was less flexible than she was. Then it was Lukka's turn. To her amazement, he was incredibly fast. But it must have required much effort on his part, because once he reached the top, it took him quite a while to catch his breath and he repeatedly massaged his back.

The police stayed in Ramnagar for most of the night. On several occasions, enormous torch-lamps searched the large grounds that stretched beneath the tree. The glare of the lamps showed up all the rubbish strewn there.

Twice the torch beam stopped when it came to the peepal tree. But this must have simply been a deviation, because it was flashed back onto the temple almost instantly. Then it searched the river and the ghats. Amidst the leaves now complete darkness

returned. Just before dawn, the file of jeeps pushed off. By daybreak, the grounds were deserted again.

'Let's climb down,' Lukka whispered.

He had only just leaned over when the purring of an engine was heard coming from the river. Devi pulled the screen of leaves apart. Two bodies lay in the bottom of a lorry trailer. Slightly lower down, on the platform over looking the railing, some Harijans were setting up two funeral pyres. There were no garlands, no procession of tambourines, no priest either or any family. Only the Doms, the men who burnt dead bodies. Beside her Devi felt the shaking of leaves, and Lukka's head next to hers. She tried to push him away. But he insisted, and managed to pull himself up onto the adjoining branch. That was how he discovered what she had been trying in vain to hide from him. The bodies of Baladin and Kalla were laid out against one another, covered only with a simple loincloth.

'And Mira?' Devi muttered. 'What have they done with Mira?'

Lukka mustn't have heard her; his pupil had shrunk abruptly, and he was now staring down at the two pyres. The first one was too small for Baladin's huge frame, but the second was too wide for the slender Kalla. Even the flames themselves seemed to hesitate before him, as if the prey wasn't worthy enough. They twisted and turned, twisted into coils, then brusquely flickered, only to hesitate once again, until one of them gathered new impetus fuelled by a gust of wind, and swallowed up the corpse in one go.

Now Devi decided to climb down. The others followed. Face to face with Lukka a few minutes later, at the foot of the tree, she was amazed to see him so dry-eyed.

It was only the next day that his pain burst forth, when they reached the bottom of the ravine where they had left their arms and backpacks. It was midday, the place was deserted and it was raining. Lukka had just unearthed Kalla's bag, and had taken out his gun, an old Enfield rifle dating from the time of the British Raj. He placed it on his shoulder next to his own machine-gun, and stared into the distance at the cliffs. Several

paths climbed up to the tops whereas others rushed headlong into the gorges, carving out long winding tracks on their way. Man Singh pointed out one of them. As far as he knew, it led to a shrine where they could at least spend the night.

Lukka didn't answer. He bent down to take out his little accordion, and play a few notes. Despite lying in the bottom of his bag for quite a while now, the instrument didn't seem to have suffered any damage. He gave a strange smile, sad yet content. Adjusting his accordion he straightened up, before plunging into the opposite ravine, stiff as before. He was playing a touchingly sweet tune, over which he screamed Kalla's name from time to time, but in a voice loud enough to tear his lungs apart.

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But the story has to enfold back into itself; to come full circle. The only way to create this last link was through a man of compassion and infinite wisdom, a stranger, a man of providence who would appear at the last minute, as always in the ancient stories. He would conclude with a word, a mere gesture, which would give the illusion of it all somehow making sense. In this case it was Rajendra Chaturvedi. He was the one who put an end to Devi's escapades. According to recent reports, he now leads a quiet life, somewhere between Nagpur and Murwara, in a small town, situated on the road that has linked northern and southern India since the time of the Moghuls. He commands a police squad there. Despite his becoming a celebrity following his meeting with the Bandit Queen, his days remain as quiet as those of any other bureaucrat, and he is still quite fit, although fond of his beer. In fact, his life is guided by the very principles that led him straight to Devi.

He is a very reserved man, secretive even, with strong features and a lively, though contemplative expression. At the time of this affair, he must have been thirty-seven. In the photographs taken of him then, it was possible to perceive a very subtle

elegance in his manner, which even carried over into the way he carried out his duties. For example, in winter when the other policemen put on badly knitted, skimpy, woollen sweaters over their khaki shirts, he wore a parka. His glasses were also slightly tinted, sober, worthy of the best European designers. The fact that he stood out because of his appearance was already a mystery, especially when you think of the position Chaturvedi occupied when he implemented the plan that brought him straight to Devi. He was Superintendent of Police at Bhind, a large market town in the northern most part of Madhya Pradesh, a wild area of fields, gorges and undergrowth in the heart of the Valley.

In spite of the halo he acquired as a result of his role in Devi's story—he is represented as a god-like character in the first film devoted to the adventures of the Bandit Queen—little else is known about Rajendra Chaturvedi, apart from his preference for ice-cold beer, and the fact that he had become involved in this unbelievable adventure of his own free will. Perhaps, he was actually embarrassed by the saviour image he had recently acquired. Or maybe he considered explanations to be far more harmful than actual silence; at the bottom this matter wasn't as clear-cut as it seemed at the time.

For his experience with Devi was nothing other than a magnificent application of the theories of non-violence, so dear to Gandhi. Besides, Chaturvedi's admiration for Mahatma's ideas was incontestable; he courageously applied them in every position that had been entrusted to him. It was what he called, the gentle way (somewhat banal, it must be admitted) but the expression took on a new meaning when the customary ill-treatment of the police is considered. It all began, according to him, with the way they spoke about the robbers and assassins in the ravines. Personally, he refused to call them 'bandits.' He preferred to refer to them in the same way as they themselves did: as baghis, rebels. Chaturvedi reckoned the that miscreants roaming the gorges were above all revolutionaries. Although, they were criminals, they were still human beings and as such, could repent. So it was basically a question of teaching them

the gentle way. Having done this, they could, perhaps, be convinced to mend their ways and live their lives somewhat intelligently, among their fellow men.

When the massacre of Behmai took place, Chaturvedi was in charge of a station in the Gwalior region which was also destroyed by bandits. He had managed to win over the confidence of the people in no time at all, as indeed he did everywhere he went. He listened to their complaints, didn't play games with the rebels, kept his word, and personally monitored the behaviour of his men as they conducted interrogations, severely punishing the first sign of brutality. It was the same with the small rajahs who dominated the ravines. He often spent entire days listening to their requests. They could ask him for a job, advice on how to obtain compensation after a road accident, or about a wedding, or how to sell land. Tirelessly, Chaturvedi played the role of justice of the peace, social activist and even confidant. In his entourage, 'the gentle way' was looked upon as a wonderful, intellectual whim especially in the neighbouring regions, under the tough surveillance of the Uttar Pradesh government. Nevertheless, although the ravines of north Gwalior were among the most bloody and violent in the area, a certain calm gradually returned even here. But Chaturvedi didn't swagger. He didn't boast about his success; he just continued wearing himself out, day after day, playing his waiting game.

Some people suggested that his initiative was, in fact, guided by his ulterior political ideas. It is true, that his wife was an activist in Mrs. Gandhi's party. Chaturvedi himself had close links with the young Maharajah from Gwalior, a member of the same party and an intimate friend of Rajiv Gandhi, eldest son of Indira. Contrary to the politicians who governed the neighbouring State, the Scindia family, glorious descendants of the Sun adopted the virtues of democracy of its own free will after Independence. It therefore openly favoured a non-violent solution to organised crime in the ravines. As a result, from the sixties on, those with clout in Gwalior encouraged the efforts of a fervent disciple of Mahatma, who decided to go on foot to the bottom of the gorges and preach. As was to be expected,

the results were rather disappointing. All the same, ten years later the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh employed the same idea, adding a little more realism to its implementation. He asked the bandits to give themselves up; in exchange their lives would be spared; they would be freed in a not too distant future, and their families and mistresses would be protected.

This measure met with unprecedented success, way beyond anyone's hopes. The bandits came in droves to turn themselves in to the authorities. Thousands of peasants flocked to the enormous, gatherings organised and were convinced that they were witnessing some kind of miracle. The bandits solemnly deposited their arms and ammunition, sometimes yielding piles of bullets, onto platforms covered with garlands.

This massive surrender, of 1972, which drew in about three hundred bandits in a few weeks didn't, for all that, put an end to the attacks in the Gwalior region. But it certainly gave credence to the idea that miracles were taking place. The peasants' imagination could only but comply. In their minds everything simultaneously represented truth; life and death, good and evil, fascination for the savage laws of the vendetta and these liturgies performed by those in power, during which hatred seemed to dissolve in the silky intoxication of universal compassion.

In Madhya Pradesh, as in all the other states, the Behmai massacre still shook the advocates of non-violent solutions. People had begun to proclaim the dubious virtues of the old biblical precept, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' and the even more violent translation the peasants of the ravines had given it: 'An amputated foot for a wounded big toe.' But strangely enough, because the notion of surrender was considered to be absurd, it simply took on even greater importance for Chaturvedi and his friends from the palace in Gwalior. If she actually did surrender, due to the publicity the Bandit Queen attracted, they were guaranteed enormous political benefits that would certainly stretch way beyond the State boundaries.

So it wasn't entirely coincidental that Chaturvedi was

appointed to Bhind, at a time when repression headed by the authorities in Uttar Pradesh, was beginning to resemble downright savagery. The cruelty of the police reached a climax when the corpse of Mira, wife of Baladin, mowed down by them, was paraded in the village completely naked. The photographs had hit the headlines. On the surface, this appointment looked like a kind of exile. As Bhind was close to the jungles and the ravines, it was a difficult posting. But it was also to be hoped that the bandits attracted by the apparent goodwill of Chaturvedi, would be tempted to take refuge there. Another reason for being optimistic, was that the border between the two states was only a few kilometers from there. They would only have to stop guarding this area, or at least pretend to stop, in order to attract the bandits. They would have to play the game.

At this stage, the fantasy woven about Devi had only served to mask complete failure. But public disapproval was such, that the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh couldn't avoid what was, in their eyes at least, a disaster. He resigned. When he left, he loudly declared that he was the victim of flagrant injustice. He boasted about his brilliant results—more than a thousand bandits killed within the last year. He attributed his personal downfall to the collusion of his political enemies with the bandits. He reminded everyone, that one of his brothers had been shot down by them, and concluded by solemnly reasserting that he was absolutely against any form of pardon or surrender.

His proclamations didn't have the effect he had hoped for; far from it. Conspiracies fell apart one by one, including a plan which tried to trap Devi, using the hatred she aroused in many other bandits. Like their predecessors, the U.P. police had just negotiated a deal with the Singh brothers. It was always the same. Immunity, for Devi's head. They allowed the brothers to attack Sheikhpur Gura, where the women were raped, the old men abused and Devi's entire family kept as hostage for several days. This information was casually transmitted over the radio, in the vain hope that Devi would come to free her loved ones. But she had scorned the sacred laws of the family, as she had all

the rest. She remained out of sight and silent. Now some were even saying that she was dead.

Chaturvedi was persuaded that this was not the case. He believed that Mira's fate had terrified her. He reckoned that she had crossed the border some time back, and that she was only a few miles from there, stealing, and trying to scrape an existence between the jungle and the ravines. Many strange attacks had been reported in small villages, on the edge of the forest. A couple of half-starved young bandits had emerged from the undergrowth wielding machine-guns and demanding only fruit and bags of lentils. There had also been several kidnappings. It always involved farmers, who were Thakurs. What was strange was that negotiations for the ransom had been carried with unusual speed, almost without any bargaining, as if they were in a terrible hurry.

Chaturvedi scarcely had time to clear up these incidents. Although he was convinced that they carried the stamp of Devi, he intended to end the talks he had just begun with the Great Malkhan, or the Godfather as he was called, who was the new king of the bandits since Mustaqeen's death. Malkhan, intelligent and quick-minded, had immediately understood the advantages he could enjoy during Chaturvedi's term in office. Therefore, he became one of the first to take refuge in the region of Bhind.

The negotiations lasted for several months and concluded in June 1982. They were a fantastic success. If his life was spared and his family protected, Malkhan agreed to hand over his arms. This took place in Bhind, with all the necessary pomp and ceremony. Prior to handing over their machine-guns and bullet-pouches to the authorities, the Godfather and his men were allowed to empty them before a Kali temple. They were also allowed to distribute piles of rupees to all their friends and families who had gathered in a neighbouring village. They played the accordion, sang songs of bandits' laments together, then drew nearer to kiss the Chief Minister's feet. When it was over, Malkhan and his men were transferred to prison in Gwalior.

Chaturvedi had promised Malkhan that he would be treated with the greatest clemency, and not be put in solitary

confinement. He would be served food suitable to his caste, and enjoy several hours of freedom in the prison yard, with his men, with his family, his friends and his admirers. He could even organise basket-ball matches if he so wished, as a court had been set up in one of the yards.

All the promises were kept. The news that Chaturvedi was a man of his word quickly spread through the ravines. As a result, a few weeks later a messenger came on behalf of Ghanshyam, another bandit and one of the most respected figures in the Valley. Apparently, he was also thinking of giving himself up.

A few days earlier, Chaturvedi had learnt that Devi was, doubtless in the area. Moreover, his informer had sworn to him that she had planned a couple of raids assisted by Ghanshyam. He was determined to find out all he could. It was quite a delicate matter for Ghanshyam was very unpredictable. By questioning Ghanshyam about Devi, even discreetly, Chaturvedi admitted he also ran the risk of coming up against a brick wall. Moreover, Ghanshyam might also slip through his fingers forever.

So he was amazed when his go-between mentioned Devi's name; the giant had actually proved to be forthcoming. He didn't deny that he had just carried out a few operations with her. Throughout their interminable bargaining, he seemed to take an almost unhealthy pleasure in describing in great detail the state of decline that she was now reduced to: 'She no longer has a band' he revealed through his messenger one day. 'Neither does she have the nerve to go and negotiate the booty they acquired a while ago, in Uttar Pradesh. She is too scared of being recognised, as is Man Singh. They live like a pair of jackals, they are afraid of everything and everyone. Even of me, although I really have helped them out quite a lot. They are alone and dirty. People everywhere say that Devi is a queen, but the truth is, she is poorer than the poorest peasant. Even though she prays to the devi twice a day, she is wasting her time. Praying won't feed her. She runs through the ravines in a disgusting pair of jeans, has no opportunity to even wash them because she is scared each time she stops. She just about has the time to wash

herself. Her shoes are full of holes. Come to think of it, this has been going on for more than a year now. She hides her uniform and her tarpaulin in a small plastic bag. More often than not, she eats stale chapatis. She can just about carry her gun and bullet pouch.'

Chaturvedi was sceptical when he heard this. The bandits were like everyone else. They loved confusing truth and falsehood, even to the point of confusing themselves. But as the messages began to add up, it became quite clear (although nothing was ever actually said) Ghanshyam wanted to hand over his arms in the company of Devi. This way, he too could enjoy the benefits that would certainly accrue to her on surrender. 'You will never find her,' he relayed to Chaturvedi one day. 'She moves to a new hide-out every night. But I know where she is. I know the forest like the back of my hand. She is sick and tired, Man Singh even more so. One day, he said before me: "What is the point in us running like this? We are washed out; we would be better off digging a hole and letting ourselves die there." She had answered: "If we must die, Man Singh, we will die running." He said nothing to this. He is courageous to stay with her at all, after all the bad luck she brought to Vikram Mallah and the Great Mustaqeen...'

A few days later, Chaturvedi left Bhind to go to Delhi. He had succeeded in arranging a meeting with Mrs. Gandhi. It concerned Devi. Indira Gandhi was quickly persuaded by his arguments. She knew the area, as she had inaugurated the new bridge at Kalpi.

What is certain is, that as an outstanding politician, Indira Gandhi immediately saw that the only way out of this crazy escapade for the Bandit Queen, was surrender; as much for the government of a state administered by her friends, as for Devi herself, for whom she had always had a kind of female sympathy. She immediately endorsed secret negotiations. From that moment on, a plan for a draft agreement was drawn up. The conditions were identical to those already accepted by Malkhan.

As soon as he returned to Bhind, Chaturvedi gave Ghanshyam the news, and asked him to communicate it to Devi.

It was agreed that she would give a provisional answer within eight days. A meeting was arranged in an isolated spot on the edge of the forest with Ghanshyam's messenger. Chaturvedi went on his motorbike, as he usually did. The messenger was waiting for him. He didn't waste any time chatting and came straight out with the negative reply. Chaturvedi remained calm. He asked at once whether Devi had given any reasons for her answer. As it happened, there was just one, about which the messenger didn't hesitate to inform him. As soon as he had mentioned the word 'surrender' to Devi, she had turned her back on him and before escaping into the undergrowth, had retorted: 'Each one to his own shadow. I am used to the dark.'

For one moment, Chaturvedi was perplexed. He handed over the wad of banknotes to the messenger, in payment for his services, then switched on the engine of his motorbike. Just at that moment the messenger moved towards him. Pointing to the thickets in the jungle, he made a remark that was even more bizarre than Devi's had been: 'Don't worry, the night is on your side; the forest too...'

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'Go away towards the mountain,' the Guru had said. 'You are in doubt. You are bogged down in the darkness. Go towards the light. Go towards the heights; towards nacreous whiteness.' 'But I don't know what nacreous whiteness is, Devi had shouted, 'I don't know where the heights are!' 'Your soul is heavy, Devi, weighed down with the blood of the dead. Don't ask why. Take to the roads without a moment's thought. Just go. Go on Devi; purge yourself; get out of the forest; take to the road; go towards the heights, towards a pure whiteness.'

The Guru had then burnt some kapur, in a small container. When the smoke started to rise towards the tree tops, he had repeated in his voiceless chanting: 'Go towards the heights, Devi. Purge yourself, right down to your very soul; take the road that rises; go Devi: Think of when you didn't even exist; when you

were a void in the breast of emptiness. As your heart is heavy after a sad experience, you must forget your body, eaten away by a weakness which is not exhaustion. Become your own Queen again. Go and look for the peace of the night. Go towards the heights.

She obeyed as she had each time before. Together with Man Singh, she had looked for the mountain tracks. They walked for days on end, sleeping in ditches, anywhere they could find, wherever the path led them. They wandered into the many ruined caravansaries situated on the north road, or hunched themselves up in the tiny oratories. Once or twice they even slept at the bottom of concrete ducts with other peasants, who had come to try their luck in the town. They were often taken for a couple of pilgrims when they stopped to nibble a chapati at a stall.

Of and on, she came on the poster demanding her ransom, faded and torn. In fact, it seemed that no one was interested any longer. The poster had mingled with the decor of stops, electoral advertising, film publicity, spurts of oil, heaps of rubbish, and the watercress beds where the buffalos snorted; it was one with pools of grease, pyramids of cowdung, temples blackened by the rainy season, garish gods daubed on the front of lorries, in the tangled mass of cars, bicycles, scooters, all kinds of animals and people of all ages, stalls full of bric-a-brac. In short, the road.

They now were impatient to get there. He didn't like the road, and preferred to turn a blind eye to what she searched for in the mountains. She had been vague when she had decided to go: 'It's an order from my Guru. You can come or stay. Do whatever you like. But I'm going.' He had thought about it for a moment, and had then given a long sigh. She knew then that he would follow her without any discussion. Only as they were leaving the forest did he venture to say in a muffled voice, as though he were cursing: 'We must eat up there. We can steal; but we don't know the area. We should...' He never finished his sentence, but pointed in the direction of the northern ravines. So she mumbled: 'You are right...' And that was how, without actually saying

anything, they decided to dig out the watches. As a matter of fact, they spoke to each other less and less. Two incidents had marked this new silence between them: the day Lukka had left them, and above all, the day Devi had heard from Ghanshyam what had happened to Mira. When she finally found the courage to run to the Guru, following the visit of Ghanshyam's messenger, the first words she cried were: 'Guru, help me. I have strayed too far. My eyes no longer see. Night stands before me!' As usual, the Guru didn't say anything. He allowed her to finish moaning. 'I feel as if I am dead,' she continued. 'I can't see anything; I don't know anything anymore!'

'All the same, you managed to get as far as here!' the Guru sniggered. Tears began to roll down. 'My body is still with me, Guru. That is true. It remains solid and endures everything; hunger, thirst, rain, mud. But my soul...' He let her sob until she could sob no more. When she caught her breath, he merely smiled. Then he remarked: 'Your soul is there, Devi. It just doesn't know how to leave your body.'

'Have confidence in the power of silence, Devi; be patient. The words that can release you are within; they are trying to find their way out; let them.' She interrupted him: 'But I am afraid, Guru, the Nagamantra is having no effect; I am once again afraid of death...'

The Guru had started to ignite wood pieces in his small vessel. Once they were lit he muttered: 'It isn't death you are afraid of, Devi, or of succumbing to the authorities, or even of prison. Most likely your spirit is no longer part of this world. What scares you is not knowing what is hidden within, and what is going to emerge very soon. So, go towards the heights, Devi, go towards the nacreous whiteness. You will see, the words will come; they won't be long now. They will pass your lips and you will have no fear. Wash the blood off you; wash the dead from you. Fly towards the cold blue sky. Run Devi; go towards the heights. Be nothing more than a skull and a breath. Forget the red, Devi. Go towards the white. And when you have seen it, come back to me.'

When he had finished chanting, the Guru took her wrist, and

placed on the middle finger of her right hand, a ring with a pale kitten on it. It most certainly intrigued those who noticed it later on. Its milky coloured stone and cloudy brilliance was a little like the stomachs of crocodiles on the banks of the Ganga. As she walked towards the mountains, Devi continually stroked it. Perhaps, that is what gave her strength during the long nights on the way.

The border with Nepal at Raxaul could scarcely be recognised as being one; they could have crossed it in just one day. Devi was in a hurry to move on, although she was the one who had wanted to sell the watches. They finally discovered an obese pawnbroker, half-Chinese, who seemed interested in three of their gold watches. The old, portly, little man must have realized that they were starving. Either that, or he had heard a rumour—common in the bazaars as soon as even a small deal was made—that they had been living in concrete ducts, behind the railway station. The fact remains, that he dragged out the haggling for at least a week, during which they only had sweetened tea to sustain themselves. In the end, they struck a deal. Just in time, as the wind was getting up and the duct was beginning to freeze.

As soon as she had pocketed the money, Devi ran to the office where they sold bus tickets. There were still a few places left for Nepal. She was asked where she intended to get off. 'At the summit,' she answered. 'Not before the summit.' The ticket-seller looked at her, surprised, and muttered the name of a stop. She asked: 'Is that the highest point?' He nodded in reply, then added in a sceptical tone: 'Only tourists do that.' She placed a wad of rupees on the counter. 'Do you have papers?' the man continued. She didn't answer. He persisted, now becoming increasingly suspicious: 'A passport?' You aren't from around here, you have an accent.—'Who do think I am!' Devi retorted, and slammed her hand down on the tickets before walking off.

When she met up with Man Singh, she decided not to say anything to him. All the same she convinced him to wait for the bus on the Nepalese side of the border. They crossed it on foot, dodging between the daily clutter on the bridge.

Before getting into the bus, Devi inspected the sky as she

had done all the other days. Because of the wind, it was very clear. High up on the northern slope, a long ribbon of snow embellished the horizon.

'White,' she whispered to Man Singh.

But it was only the clouds. As always, Man Singh had let her talk. Despite appearances, it was in fact extremely courageous of him. Unflinchingly, he gave in to the power that surged from the depths of this woman, to this mystery, seeking a path. If it is absolutely necessary to call this extreme state of submission love, then it is equally imperative to remember the single, striking moment that visits the dark hours of those who love at least once. The moment of absolute if transient certainty that is not the meeting of two beings, or even that of two souls; but an unfamiliar potency, trailing mystery and all the violence of the gods behind it.



The winter of 1982-1983 was an extremely cold one, Rajendra Chaturvedi recalls. A very thick fog hung over the entire Valley, that only lifted with the wind's violent gusts that ripped the leaves off the trees in the ravines.

On one of these windy days, and after weeks of silence, Chaturvedi received a message from Ghanshyam. As always, it was terse: 'I have had some news from Devi.' The man paused to watch Chaturvedi's reaction. But as he remained calm he added:

'She said: "We must see each other; this cop and I."'

'I will see her,' Chaturvedi replied immediately.

'She said you must come alone, unarmed.'

Chaturvedi agreed. The messenger went on:

'I will come back in two days time. Be ready by then.'

With that, he ran off. Two weeks later, there was still no sign of him. Chaturvedi was getting increasingly uneasy. So he took a rather dangerous decision. He tried to meet Devi's family.

Her parents still lived on the other side of the border, at the

bottom of the Sheikhpur Gura ravines. Chaturvedi managed to send them a message, and finally met them down by the river. They had no idea where their daughter was; in fact, they hadn't seen her for ages, any more than her brothers and sisters had. So Chaturvedi took the initiative to strike a bargain: if Devi surrendered, he would bring the family to Gwalior and would personally find a home and some work for them.

They seemed enthusiastic about this, yet they still couldn't tell him where she was. Never short of ideas, Chaturvedi asked them to tape a message for her on his tape recorder. They agreed willingly. They didn't actually dare advise Devi to surrender. They simply begged her to trust Chaturvedi. He had also brought along a Polaroid. He took a few photographs of the family, and gave them to the parents. He showed Devi's brother how to use the camera, and asked him to take a photograph of him, Chaturvedi, with the rest of the family. He kept this shot for himself.

There was still no news on his return. Many weeks went by. He went over the conversation that he had with the messenger during his last visit, so many times, that in the end he was convinced he had reacted too quickly. Instead of repeating, word for word, the message Devi had sent him: 'We must see each other,' he had answered, 'I am going to see her,' a phrase that he began to think she had reacted badly to.

As the days went by, his anguish reached such a pitch that he finally shared it with his brother. He managed to convince Chaturvedi that the disappearance of the messenger was, in fact, a blessing in disguise. He implored him to refuse any meeting with Devi. Chaturvedi didn't promise anything, but he did feel somewhat relieved. One evening, around seven o'clock, just as he was about to sit down for dinner the messenger came to his door. It was a moment he least expected to see him.

'Now,' he said breathlessly. 'Take your motorbike. I will get on to the pillion.'

'Where are we going?' Chaturvedi whispered.

The question was a mere formality, as it was quite obvious that

the messenger wouldn't answer him. In effect, he simply repeated:

'Your motorbike. I'll get on the back. Don't let anyone know. And no guns!'

Then he pointed to the door. Using the excuse. to collect his jacket, Chaturvedi ran into his office, and reached in his pockets for his Polaroid, his tape recorder as well as the shot he had taken of Devi's parents. A few minutes later, they set off along the north road.

The messenger lead him several times down narrow tracks that endlessly branched off, and Chaturvedi quickly lost any sense of the direction. The paths became increasingly steeper and even more narrow; the motorbike was struggling, and hitting off stones and roots. They rode until midnight, when they took a break. Some peasants offered them tea and chapatis; and then they set off again. But this time, on foot.

The messenger lead the way, carrying a powerful torch. For the entire length of the journey, he didn't say a word, except to warn Chaturvedi that it would take them several hours to reach. They scaled the increasingly sharp pathways, the earth often crumbling under their feet. On many occasions, Chaturvedi, who was less sure-footed, almost rolled to the bottom of the crevasses.

Then the wind rose. The fog cleared up, and rows of peaks emerged in front of them, bluish in the early morning light. They continued walking. Finally, Chaturvedi made out a camp fire at daybreak, on the outer rim of a gorge. A frail outline moved before the flames, lengthened by the butt of a rifle. The messenger let out a strange cry, a sound that resembled the howling of a jackal. There and then, the butt of the gun was lowered, probably to take aim. 'The messenger gave out this strange cry several times; five in all,' Chaturvedi remarked. Another outline unfolded from behind the fire, also extended by the rifle. Then a voice rang out in the darkness, a hoarse voice. A voice that melted into an outline, the outline becoming a slender body, young, snake-like, passionate flesh, that knelt before his feet, and said over and over again: 'Come, come here, come so that we can talk...'

Although, getting off to such an encouraging start, the bargaining was not all that easy. There were various meetings, always at the end of an uneven track. Sometimes more than a week went by between two encounters. Chaturvedi had the impression that these moments would never end. Nothing was ever a certainty with Devi. One day she said, 'Even if no one surrenders with me, I am giving myself up.' A week later, when everything seemed to be in order, and he was on the point of sending the official list of her conditions to Delhi, she would suddenly come out with another demand. Some requests could have been considered as mere whims. For example, during their second meeting, she ordered him to move, at the same time as her family, the herd of goats and above all the white cow which her husband had paid, along with a bicycle, for the right to marry her. So they had to start bargaining all over again.

She didn't give in. Chaturvedi had to send a covered truck down to her village. One night her parents secretly piled their herd of goats and the precious bovid into the back of it. And then the waiting game would start anew. However, as soon as he saw her again, he was convinced that her mind had been made up a long time ago. There was a strange light in her eyes, sometimes seen in those who have abandoned everything and taken to the roads or in the expression of those hermits who live in the jungle. The morning of their first encounter, he had noticed the ring with the white kitten on her finger. Although, he didn't specify where he had seen it, he spoke about it to a priest of the devi in Bhind. He confirmed that it was a stone that the Guru in the forest gave to their disciples, when they wanted souls to separate from the body during their lifetime. They only gave this ring to exceptional beings, to disciples who already possessed divine powers.

Chaturvedi had never been inclined to mysticism, and showed little interest in these stories of the forest. He preferred sport,

well presented reports, cleanliness, cold beer, and above all, efficiency. But for all that, he wasn't simplistic. He knew just how meandering the human mind could be. What he expected from Devi was a bona fide surrender; he didn't care about all the rest. In any case, Devi never spoke to him about gods. The only time the conversation touched on this subject, was the morning they first met up, when she had served him a glass of tea. He was tied for words, and had just noticed her ring. He had wanted to start up a conversation and, pointing to Man Singh, who was sitting on the other side of the fire said: 'Are you married?' She immediately straightened up: 'We rebels don't need your ceremonies. We take our oaths at the foot of the trees in the forest. Only they have the power to penetrate our souls.'

Apart from her wild-cat expressions, what struck him most was this: Devi didn't speak like everyone else. She had a limited vocabulary, and used words that always seemed to get straight to the point. They had a rhythm of their own that made the skin crawl; like the pulse of a living mystery. When she spoke like that, even Man Singh remained speechless. He followed her flow of sentences with his mouth slightly open; with a worried, yet happy, expression on his face.

'For the duration of our negotiations,' Chaturvedi went on, 'Devi gave the impression of not really being there. Which was, I suppose, why she was so unpredictable. I didn't know what had happened to her: deprivation, perhaps, or her life of a hunted jackal. Anyway, all that was left by the time I met her was the child in her. She was as thin as the hermits; she had no hips, no breasts. The woman, the lover, the female avenger, it had all disappeared. Something strange had probably occurred, because from then on, she was not at all like what she had been in the past. Each time I went to see her, I had to keep telling myself that she was a murderess, that her pretty, slender hands had caused blood to flow, that she had touched the depths of human injustice. But as soon as I discovered her with her red head-band, her short hair, her bell-bottomed jeans and her man's shirt, it was too much for me. I really had the impression that I was in

front of a little girl. A kid, there is no other word for it. Or a little boy who had grown up too quickly, and still wanted to play war games. Obviously, the only difference was that she didn't have a plastic toy in her hand, but a Mauser 303, in perfect condition. And she never hid the fact, that if things weren't going the way she wanted them to, she could easily pull the trigger! So I behaved the same way as I would with a child. I stalked her; I caught her out by playing a game. For example, on the first day she was so distrustful of me, she didn't believe I had seen her parents. So I showed her the photograph. She couldn't believe her eyes. She stroked it, repeating: 'But how did you do it, how did you do it...?' Then I took my tape recorder out of my pocket, and turned it on. She heard her mother's voice; begging her to trust me. She knew exactly what a tape recorder was, she was also familiar with cameras. After all, she wasn't a wild child! Although, she did bow before me, and kiss my feet again, when she stood up, she said: 'You can do magic.'

On the other hand, when Chaturvedi tried to photograph her, she lashed out: 'Never! I don't want any pictures of me before I surrender, do you hear! Not one photograph.' She was upset for quite a while after that.

Maybe, that was why the haggling went on for so long. She was suspicious of everything. She demanded a guarantee that she wouldn't be hung or extradited to Uttar Pradesh. This request was quite easy to grant, if she was imprisoned for carrying illegal arms and then never brought to trial. She asked not to be ever seen handcuffed, either before or after she had given herself up. She demanded land for her family, who were now settled in Gwalior, with the cow and the herd of goats. Then she wanted Chaturvedi to promise that he would never reveal the identity of those who had helped them during these lengthy negotiations, who had brought the messages, or who had led him through the maze of ravines. In any case, when he thought it was all tied up, she demanded the very same treatment for Man Singh, and the same form of protection for his family.

Now all that was left, was to decide on a date with Devi for the ceremony. This was another point on which she was completely inflexible. She claimed she would choose it herself, with the help of a Guru who lived in the jungle.

Chaturvedi took to the ravine roads one last time with the messenger. He still didn't feel at ease. The word 'Guru,' coming from the mouth of a woman who had never yielded to anybody in her life, seemed like a very bad sign to him.

The wind had risen, clearing the sky and the sun shone brightly. Devi was wearing a sari, sitting in front of a gas stove on which she was preparing a meal. 'For the first time, I had the impression of being in the presence of a woman,' Chaturvedi recalls. 'She had slipped some bangles onto her wrists, put kohl around her eyelids and made a small plait. She was leaning over her pots with such concentration that it was almost touching. I suppose she wanted to show me that she was just like every other woman. But she still wore that absent, tired expression. She was only too well aware of the fact that in a few days time, it would be all over. That she would never leave prison. The Singh brothers were still trying to track her down in Uttar Pradesh, stirring up the hatred of the Thakurs whenever they could. They had declared many times in public, during electoral meetings, that they would find her wherever she was, even if they had to come as far as here, the other side of the border. One evening, at the end of a round of discussions, Devi said to me, as if summing up what little future was left for her: "If I go to prison, I'll die. If I leave, the Thakurs will kill me."'

As soon as he arrived, Chaturvedi read out the list of the conditions for her surrender, that had been granted by Indira Gandhi. Devi listened in silence, stirring her curry in the pan. Then she asked him to give the sheet of paper to her messenger, who knew how to read very well. He slowly read through the list, then signalled his approval to Devi She said nothing at all. She simply handed them plastic plates and set about filling them. It was so warm, that Chaturvedi took the opportunity, before taking his plate, to take off his parka and open the neck

of his shirt. For one second , it was possible to see through a small gap, a thread indicating that he was a Brahmin. Devi froze, then handed him back his plate. Her eyes had suddenly become hard; in fact he had the feeling that they were going to explode. But nothing happened. She watched him eating without a word, then after a few minutes said:

'Do you remember Mira? Do you know how she died?'

He nodded, looking surprised. She went on:

'Do you know what they did with her afterwards?'

He nodded his assent a second time. Another silence ensued, this time much longer than the first. He stared into his plate, and started eating again. But she didn't let up:

'Do you know who killed her? Thakurs. And Brahmins, like you.'

Now he was the one who felt like exploding. Once again he managed to stay calm. But she was still upset, and continued:

'Give me your oath, that will prove that I can trust you.'

The day must have been blessed, for the words came to him immediately.

'Devi... As we have shared salt ...'

And he lifted up his plate to show her he had just finished eating his Mallah curry.

So one last time, Devi straightened up beneath her veil. At that moment, she no longer looked like a child or even a woman. She looked like a queen or a monarch from an old tale; like one of those princesses who have been embittered by strife, but have become so strong by the end of the story that they discover the infallible words of the gods.

'In that case, there is just one more condition. I want two portraits behind me on the rostrum: one of Mahatma, and one of the Goddess.'

Before kneeling in front of him, she added:

'I am surrendering to their souls, and not to the justice of mankind.'

With that, she ran off into the gorge—probably to pray. So it was Man Singh who communicated the date of surrender to Chaturvedi: 12 February, 1983.

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It is just before the surrender ceremony, and it is cold. A crowd is rushing into an enormous field. On one side there is a house which has been lit, as if for a wedding. On the other, there is a very high rostrum, set on the roof of a school so that no one will miss any of what is about to take place.

Again, as is traditional for a big wedding, the canopy of the rostrum is sewn over with multi-coloured stars. The dawn is breaking, and the electric lighting is turning pale in the luminosity of the morning. They have to leave the house and get through the crowds. The photographer's battle has begun. They want to take every bit of her. Her smile, her brow furrowed from waiting so long, her scarlet head band, and the huge red shawl which she has just draped over herself.

Devi feels hot and cold at the same time. Some people are shouting, others remain silent. Some are pushing and shoving, while others are afraid. Either she will be adored or despised, cursed or blessed. But they will all talk about it. They will recall what happened, they will dream about it. They will swear that she was either beautiful or ugly, courageous or not. That she was only a prostitute, absolute filth, the lowest of the low. But others will say the contrary, proclaim her a Goddess, scream for justice while praying for it.

And in reality? None of it is the truth. Apart from when she steps forward to surrender. The proof is that she has nothing to say. Nothing to understand or explain.

She isn't afraid to show her face, to offer it to these thieves of souls. But hers is no longer for sale. Nothing matters except what is going to happen on the rostrum. Although, it doesn't prevent her from hearing and seeing. It seems like the entire world is united around her; there are even white men among the photographers. They look like the ones she caught a glimpse of in Nepal, in the pass

from where she saw the snow appear on the mountains. They look as if they are suffering from the sun, although it is the middle of winter and nowhere near midday!

But from now on, winter and midday no longer exist. There will be no more monsoons, no seasons, no feasts. It would be a return to complete emptiness. Total abnegation, far from love, far from hate. But she has nothing to regret. Devi has already lived life, a thousand lives in just one. When she is a few metres from the rostrum, she allows herself a smile, which is on the verge of laughter. She is thinking about the chickens she once saw being killed in the villages. Although they had been decapitated, they continued to run through the sidestreets. And that was the kind of life that awaited her. Her body would exist, she would have the same movements, the words and the wailing of the living. But her soul would no longer be there. The Guru had promised her this would be so. He had also added that this would grant her total freedom, and which the gods only bestowed on two kinds of people: the very wise, and those who fought for justice.

To which category did she belong? She didn't have time to think about it. Besides, what difference did it make. Here is the dais of the powerful. She is going to have to climb onto it, bow. Devi appeals to the Force of the Snake within her. Not the Black Cobra this time, but Ananta, the White Snake, the Cobra of Eternity, lying there, coiled on the milky ocean since time began, blissful. There he is, smiling at her from the depths of his sleep, exactly like when she caught sight of the snow on the mountains. Behind her the photograph of Mahatma flutters, and to her right, the coloured picture of Durga, the Goddess, perched on her tiger, smiling.

The speeches begin, an inexhaustible stream of syllables that she seems to still recognise: blood, revenge, love, justice, pardon. As the sentences accumulate, the stream becomes a torrent, rises and swells, becomes a river, a tributary, and is lost in the immense ocean of legends. Then it is time to put down her arms. The scarlet, rebel spirit is still present,

and whispers to her now, that she is the only woman among all these men, so weak, at the mercy of the rich and powerful. But suddenly, everything opens out, explodes and pales. At last, the face of the Other World, ivory, opal, pearl and snow The colours melt to become one, the noises come to a halt. It is the beginning of silence, nacreous, the end of all words—the last illusion.

**This book weaves in detail the story of the legendary woman bandit Phoolan Devi. It is stirring for its exceptional candour and sympathy. *Phoolan* is a part-real, part-fictional work.**

'The story of Phoolan Devi is being constantly refashioned, including by herself – its heroine – but not always its master; it is made of the stuff of which myths are woven. It is the tale of the rather strange little girl of whom women said that time would tame her, of the legendary criminal who would keep breathless the police force of Uttar Pradesh till her proud surrender in 1983.'

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— Catherine Clement, *La Nouvel Observateur*, Paris

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